

Chapter 6: Public Comments and Response

CHARACTERIZATION OF COMMENTS RECEIVED

National Park Service staff at Denali National Park and Preserve received comments from 15,198 individuals, organizations, and agencies on the *Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan*. This total includes both written comments and verbal comments made during five public hearings held in Anchorage, upper Susitna Valley (Talkeetna/Trapper Creek), Cantwell, Healy, and Fairbanks. Comments were received from agencies, organizations, and individuals. Comments from individuals included verbal testimony, personally written letters or e-mail messages, and form letters originated by organizations and signed by members or supporters. The number of comments received from each source is as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Agencies | 4 |
| Organizations | 21 |
| Individuals | 15,173 |
| <i>Public Hearing Testimony</i> | <i>13</i> |
| <i>Non-Form Comments</i> | <i>469</i> |
| <i>Form Letters</i> | <i>14,691</i> |
| TOTAL Comments | 15,198 |

Some individuals and organizations provided testimony at the public hearings, and they also submitted written comments. Some individuals also submitted more than one written comment. In these instances, park staff consolidated multiple comments from one source to preserve the entire substance of the comments, but counted each individual only once for tallying purposes.

Individual Comments

Comments were submitted from every state in the United States, plus the District of Columbia, two U.S. territories, and 15 foreign countries.

| | |
|----------------------|---------------|
| Local | 76 |
| Alaska | 178 |
| United States | 14,811 |
| International | 64 |
| Unknown | 44 |

“Local” includes residence addresses between Willow and Nenana along the Parks Highway and its spur roads as well as the Bush communities of Lake Minchumina, Telida, Nikolai, and Skwentna. “Alaska” includes all other addresses in the State of Alaska excluding those covered under “Local.” “United States” includes all residence

addresses within the U.S. and its territories excluding Alaska. “International” includes all residence addresses outside the U.S. “Unknown” identifies those letters for which an address is not known, generally because the individuals sent an e-mail message and did not include address information.

Most individuals expressed a preference for one of the alternatives, although there were a substantial number that commented only on specific issues or requested a modification even in the alternative they preferred. General preferences by the location of residence address are indicated in the table below.

| | No Alt Selected | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | People for Parks |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|---------------------------------|
| Local | 22 | 1 | 42 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 9 |
| Alaska | 34 | 0 | 18 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 119 |
| United States | 131 | 0 | 17 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 14,657 |
| International | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 63 |
| Unknown | 22 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 |
| TOTAL INDIV COMMENTS | 209 | 1 | 85 | 5 | 10 | 0 | 14,863 |

Of those 209 individuals who did not indicate a preference for a particular alternative, 166 individuals asked the NPS to protect wilderness character. Most of these comments specifically asked the NPS to ban or restrict snowmachine use and aircraft landings and/or aircraft overflights. Other common requests from these comment letters included protection of wildlife and natural soundscapes, designation of Wilderness, and excluding recreational snowmachine use from the definition of “traditional activities.” Twenty-four individuals asked the NPS not restrict aircraft landings or ban flightseeing in the park.

All of the 14,691 form letters, plus 172 of the non-form letters, supported the People for Parks Alternative, which is described below.

Organizations

Twenty-one organizations submitted detailed comments covering the entire range of issues covered in the plan. Most indicated an alternative preferred by that organization, although almost all suggested considerable modifications. The organization and these general preferences are indicated below.

| | Organization | Preferred Alternative |
|----|--|--|
| 1 | Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association | 5 for aviation |
| 2 | Alaska Airmen's Association | 5 |
| 3 | Alaska Center for the Environment | People for Parks |
| 4 | Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition | People for Parks |
| 5 | Alaska Outdoor Access Alliance, Alaska Outdoor Council | 1 |
| 6 | Alaska Professional Hunters Association | 5 for guided services |
| 7 | Alaska Travel Industry Association | 4 |
| 8 | American Alpine Club | 3 |
| 9 | Bluewater Network | People for Parks |
| 10 | Californians for Western Wilderness | People for Parks |
| 11 | Denali Citizens Council | Elements of 2/3/People for Parks |
| 12 | Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau | No preference – provided information on the visitor industry |
| 13 | Great Old Broads for Wilderness | People for Parks |
| 14 | International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association | 5 |
| 15 | National Parks Conservation Association | People for Parks |
| 16 | Natural Resources Defense Council | People for Parks |
| 17 | Northern Alaska Environmental Center | People for Parks |
| 18 | The Ecotopian Society | People for Parks |
| 19 | The Wilderness Society | People for Parks |
| 20 | Trustees for Alaska | People for Parks |
| 21 | Wilderness Watch – Alaska | Oppose preferred – supports use limits to protect wilderness resource values |

A coalition of conservation organizations advanced the People for Parks Alternative. The main tenets of this alternative were the following:

- Use the precautionary principle to protect park resources before resource impacts occur
- Emphasize a quality visitor experience that includes intangible values
- Determine funding and details for the monitoring program before adoption of the plan
- Extend the definition of “traditional activities” used for the Old Park to the park additions and do not authorize recreational snowmobiling
- Complete the wilderness recommendation to Congress.

This alternative also requested restrictions on commercial scenic air tours similar to those proposed in Alternative 4, but excluding the Pika and Eldridge Glaciers from all scenic air tour landings.

Agencies

In addition to the comments from individuals and organizations, the National Park Service received comments from the State of Alaska, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Air Force, and the Denali Subsistence Resource Commission.

The State of Alaska letter provided detailed comments on various issues, but its principle concern was whether the National Park Service sought to manage areas outside of the Old Park “as wilderness.” The letter objected to State of Alaska actions being subject to the “minimum requirement/minimum tool” analysis outside of designated wilderness.

The U.S. EPA expressed concern about environmental impacts from snowmachine use and trail construction, and about the park’s ability to monitor indicators proposed in the plan. It did not express a preference for a particular alternative.

The U.S. Air Force comment asked the National Park Service to correct factual data concerning the Susitna Military Operations Area. The Air Force did not express a preference for a particular alternative.

The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission considered the plan at its meeting on June 28, 2005, and passed three motions concerning the need for subsistence uses to be given a higher priority in planning. The Commission also asked that the National Park Service better identify how it will address conflicts between subsistence and recreational uses.

These letters and the motions of the Subsistence Resource Commission appear in their entirety below.

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

Following are letters containing substantive public comments and the National Park Service response to those comments. Because of the large numbers of comments on this plan, only a representative sample can be published here. Included are all of the agency comments, substantive comments from organizations, and individual comments that introduce additional substantive issues. Collectively, this group of letters encompasses the entire range of substantive comments made on the *Revised Draft EIS*.

According to Director’s Order #12 Handbook, substantive comments are defined as those that do one or more of the following:

- a) question, with reasonable basis, the accuracy of information in the EIS
- b) question, with reasonable basis, the adequacy of environmental analysis

- c) present reasonable alternatives other than those presented in the EIS
- d) cause changes or revisions in the proposal.

In other words, they raise, debate, or question a point of fact or policy. Comments in favor of or against the proposed action or alternatives, or comments that only agree or disagree with NPS policy, are not considered substantive.

In the letters below, the substantive comments are bracketed and identified by a number for each letter. The response appears on the opposite side of the page, identified by the letter and number. Some responses are cross-referenced, but can be located using the following index. In the text, letters from agencies are published first, followed by letters from organizations and then letters from individuals or businesses.

| Abbrev. | Letter | Page # |
|---------|---|--------|
| AAA | Alaska Airmen's Association | 210 |
| AAC | American Alpine Club | 222 |
| AOC | Alaska Outdoor Council | 212 |
| AOPA | Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association | 207 |
| AQRC | Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition | 217 |
| AT | Air Taxi concessionaires | 303 |
| AWA | Alaska Wildland Adventures | 309 |
| APHA | Alaska Professional Hunters Association | 215 |
| BN | Bluewater Network | 234 |
| DAJV | Doyon/Aramark Joint Venture | 333 |
| DCC | Denali Citizens Council/Northern Alaska Environmental Center | 238 |
| DNPWC | Denali National Park Wilderness Centers | 325 |
| EPA | Environmental Protection Agency | 184 |
| ISMA | International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association | 263 |
| K2 | K2 Aviation | 338 |
| NPCA | National Parks Conservation Association | 268 |
| PfP | People for Parks | 203 |
| SoA | State of Alaska | 189 |
| SRC | Denali Subsistence Resource Commission | 200 |
| TWS | The Wilderness Society/Alaska Center for the Environment/Natural Resources Defense Council/Alaska Chapter Sierra Club | 286 |
| USAF | United States Air Force | 201 |

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| Bergt, Steven | 313 |
| Brease, Barbara | 315 |
| Colianni, Ruth | 317 |
| Collins, Mike and Julie | 319 |
| Dean, Frederick | 322 |
| Haber, Gordon | 335 |
| Morgan, James | 341 |
| Paragi, Tom | 342 |
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| Turnbull, Kim | 349 |
| Zeithammer, Robert | 353 |
| Zerkel, Keenan | 355 |

Comments



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

REGION 10
1200 Sixth Avenue
Seattle, Washington 98101

July 15, 2005

Reply To
Attn Of: ETPA-088

Ref: 99-077-NPS

Paul Anderson, Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
Post Office Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Dear Mr. Anderson:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIS) for the **Denali National Park and Preserve Backcountry Management Plan** (CEQ#20050165), Denali Park, Alaska. The review was conducted in accordance with EPA responsibilities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act. This section of the Clean Air Act directs EPA to specifically review and comment in writing on the environmental impacts associated with all major federal actions. Our review considers not only the impact to the environment but also the adequacy of the NEPA document itself.

EPA commends the National Park Service (NPS) for revising the Management Plan in response to public comments on the original draft EIS published in February 2003. The primary change in the RDEIS is from a management approach based on zoning to one based on desired future social and resource conditions in discrete management areas.

The RDEIS proposes five action alternatives that fall along a spectrum. Under Alternative 1 (or no action), the NPS would continue current management as guided by the 1986 General Management and 1997 Backcountry Management plans, which would result in increased visitor use and motorized access with no new services to meet increased levels of use. As a result of this, there would be moderate to major impacts to various park resources, particularly natural soundscape and wilderness resources. Alternative 2 would limit recreation opportunities to those that depend on wilderness and non-motorized forms of access. This option would limit the range of recreational opportunities but would provide moderate to major benefits for wilderness and natural soundscape resources. Alternative 3 would provide for a diversity of wilderness recreational activities and limited motorized access, resulting in moderate benefits to the diversity of recreational opportunities and to both wilderness and natural soundscape resources. Minor impacts to wildlife, subsistence and vegetation resources would be anticipated.

Response to Comments

Comments

Alternative 4, the preferred alternative, would provide for growth in a variety of recreational activities for visitors needing services, assistance, or short time-commitments while still providing some opportunities for wilderness-dependent activities. Actions in this alternative would result in moderate adverse impacts to permafrost soils, wildlife, vegetation and subsistence resources. Because this alternative provides little mitigation for past actions, there would likely be cumulative major adverse impacts to resources such as wilderness and natural soundscapes. In Alternative 5, the proposal is to allow substantial increases in use levels and motorized access parkwide, with particular concentrations to the south side of the Alaska Range. These actions would cause major impacts to vegetation, subsistence resources, and opportunities, and moderate to major impacts to wildlife, wilderness, and natural soundscapes. Without mitigation plans for past actions, alternative 5 would also result in adverse impacts to many park resources, wilderness and soundscapes in particular.

In our comments on the original draft EIS in 2003, EPA expressed concerns about the potential impact of snowmobile use on the environment in Denali National Park because of indications that snowmobile use in the park was likely to increase rapidly and because such use would have the greatest potential to cause significant environmental impacts to park resources compared with other proposed uses. EPA remains concerned that increased snowmobile usage will adversely affect wildlife, soils, vegetation, wetlands, water and air quality, and natural soundscapes. While EPA understands and supports the need to provide access for subsistence uses, we believe that snowmobile access to backcountry for recreational use may put natural resources that are important for Denali's intended uses at risk.

We are also concerned about risks and uncertainties associated with the proposed adaptive management approach. The standards and monitoring as described in the RDEIS may not be sufficient to protect important park resources. EPA recommends that the final EIS (FEIS) include more robust, quantitative standards that measure impacts to resources, a more complete description of the monitoring plan, and a description of how the monitoring information will be used to modify land management.

In addition, we are concerned about trail construction and development in the park because of potential impacts to vegetation, soils, and wildlife, as well as their ability to attract heavy use of the park, which may include off-road vehicles.

Based on these concerns and insufficient information available in the RDEIS, we have assigned a rating of EC-2 (Environmental Concerns, Insufficient Information) to the RDEIS. A summary of our comments will be published in the Federal Register. A copy of the EPA rating system used in conducting our review is enclosed for your reference.

We appreciate the opportunity to review the RDEIS. If you would like to discuss issues related to our review, please contact Mr. Theogene Mbabaliye at (206) 553-6322 or mbabaliye.theogene@epa.gov

Sincerely,

Response to Comments

Comments

Christine B. Reichgott, Manager
NEPA Review Unit

cc:
EPA Alaska Operations Office

Response to Comments

Comments

EPA Comments on the Revised Denali National Park and Preserve Backcountry Management Plan and Draft EIS

Adaptive Management approach

The NPS indicates that the proposed backcountry management plan would be implemented using adaptive management. EPA supports the use of this strategy when clear threshold values for descriptions and standards to guide future decisions are available. Ideally, the proposed plan would not only identify the thresholds, but also would discuss and identify management alternatives and mitigation that would be implemented should a threshold value be exceeded. Many of the proposed descriptions and standards for measuring the degree of impacts (i.e., low, medium, and high) are qualitative and therefore have the potential to be subjective. The RDEIS describes monitoring that relies primarily on surveys of backcountry visitors. Also, the descriptions and standards provided in the RDEIS are primarily related to impacts on the human park experience; appropriate descriptions and standards are needed for impacts to wildlife and other natural resources. EPA is concerned that significant impacts to backcountry natural resources could occur and remain undetected until damage is done. EPA recommends that the final EIS (FEIS) include more robust, quantitative standards that measure impacts to wildlife and other important natural resources. We also recommend that the FEIS include a description of the monitoring plan, how it will be funded, and how the monitoring information will be used to modify land management.

Snowmobile access and policies

EPA understands the challenges of managing areas for multiple uses. The challenge is further complicated when multiple laws and definitions apply. There appears to be some possible confusion or conflict in how the RDEIS describes definitions and policies related to regulations that affect snowmobile usage at Denali. For example, in response to comments, the RDEIS states that in the absence of a definition for “traditional activities”, there would be no immediate distinction among the activities for which snowmachines are used for access. However, the definition given in a 2000 Final Rule does define “traditional activities.” That rule states that no snowmachine use within the Old Park is authorized (section 1110(a) of 43 CFR 36.11(C)). Of importance to this proposed plan is the statement that, “NPS intends to define traditional activities and apply such definitions to other park areas, including the remainder of Denali National Park and Preserve, in subsequent processes, such as future rulemakings to implement backcountry management plans for some of the national parks in Alaska.” At that time, NPS further concluded that any snowmachine use in the Old Park would be detrimental to the resource values of the area, and that even only a few snowmachines would cause detriment to the special resource values of the Old Park, wilderness and wildlife values in particular. It would seem that these conclusions would also apply to the park additions and preserve, especially if some of these lands are to retain the features that would qualify them to be designated as wilderness areas in the future.

Easements and land exchanges

The RDEIS states that implementation of the proposed plan will require easements on private lands and a land exchange with the state of Alaska. EPA recommends the final EIS

Response to Comments

EPA-1

The final backcountry management plan (BCMP) adds additional monitoring requirements for major wildlife species. These requirements would trigger management action in response to statistically significant changes in wildlife populations, demographics, or distribution if those changes could be correlated to changes in visitor use or differences in management area regimes. Otherwise, the plan provides very robust quantifiable standards for changes in 10 indicator categories. Although characterized in Table 2-1 as high, medium, or low levels of impact, Tables 2-2 to 2-9 further explain these characterizations with specific standards. Indicators for trail and campsite disturbance, natural sound disturbance, and wildlife disturbance provide meaningful direction for monitoring the impacts of recreational use on key park natural resources. Visitor surveys for other indicators would be scientifically constructed and implemented and should provide valid information for monitoring impacts on wilderness resource values. Because this is a General Management Plan document, it focuses on general goal-setting and management strategy. It provides sufficient guidance from which to develop an implementation-level monitoring plan.

EPA-2

The Environmental Assessment for the 2000 regulation that prohibited snowmachine use in the Old Park was careful to distinguish the unique resources of the Old Park. The resources of the park additions and preserve are similar to but not identical to Old Park resources. The standards expressed in the BCMP provide appropriate protection for the resources of the 1980 additions while still allowing for special uses authorized by ANILCA. The National Park Service does not believe the level of use allowed for would preclude the designation of these areas as wilderness.

Comments

include information about the status of easement agreements and land acquisition, and show resulting alterations in park boundary locations

Tribal consultations

The RDEIS describes the process used to inform Native tribal governments and invite government-to-government consultation. However, we did not see any information that described the outcome of consultation nor how the RDEIS addressed any concerns that were raised. Information in the RDEIS indicates that throughout the park, there are many cultural sites with resources (archeological and historic) associated with native tribes. It is possible that the proposed management plan could have impacts on native cultures, their places, economy, and other resources. EPA recommends that the FEIS include information about the process that was used to consult with native tribal governments and outcome of such consultation.

3

Trail construction and improvement

The RDEIS states that park management promotes a “trail-less” philosophy at Denali. However, the RDEIS states that there are several unplanned social and constructed trails (p. 200). EPA understands that trails are constructed as needed to protect park resources. Since user-created trails generally follow corridors with more moderate, convenient terrain, proliferation and increased usage of trails could result in significant impacts to park resources, critical areas such as riparian zones and wetlands, and cultural sites. Trails typically attract greater numbers of people and off-road vehicles than off-trail areas. As described in the RDEIS, trails can have direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on a variety of park resources. Trails have direct impacts on vegetation and soil due to trampling, compaction, and erosion. Depending on the species, heavily used trails can cause significant impacts on wildlife habitat, behavior, and nutrition. Various recreational activities using trails are also known to cause wildlife displacement. There is also evidence that trails and pack animals may serve as sources and vectors for the spread of invasive weeds. Where trails and camp sites occur, for example, vegetation could be lost or changed in structure. EPA recommends that impacts be avoided and minimized in NPS’s programs for trail planning, siting, management, and monitoring.

4

Response to Comments

EPA-3

Government-to-government consultation with Native tribal governments did not result in any substantive comments on the original or revised draft BCMPs. The Denali Subsistence Resources Commission, which has many Native members, did provide comments that influenced the modified preferred alternative. Please see the responses to the motions of the Denali Subsistence Resources Commission.

EPA-4

Construction of trails would include the planning, siting, management, and monitoring components recommended by EPA to minimize impacts. In all cases, the new trails would replace existing social trails where most of the adverse impacts stated in the comment have already occurred, so the constructed trails would mitigate some aspects of past overuse.

Comments

STATE OF ALASKA

ANILCA IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM

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July 14, 2005

Paul Anderson, Superintendent
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Dear Mr. Anderson:

The State of Alaska reviewed the April 2005 Denali National Park and Preserve Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan, General Management Plan Amendment, and Environmental Impact Statement. The following comments represent the consolidated views of the State's resource agencies.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The State commends the National Park Service for issuing a revised draft plan. The revised document offers far more clarity than the initial draft plan and gives readers a much better sense of what to expect from the various alternatives and how implementation will unfold. Even though we have remaining important concerns, we nonetheless recognize the numerous substantial revisions that more closely conform to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and implementing regulations. We note in particular the effort to develop standards and indicators that facilitate management transparency and improved public involvement. Some of these standards and indicators need refinement; but we support the overall effort to develop and evolve this methodology.

While the State does not normally take positions on specific alternatives and cannot endorse the Preferred Alternative in its entirety, this alternative as a whole is preferable to alternatives 2 and 3 in attempting to balance many competing uses in the Denali backcountry. We recommend against selection of Alternatives 2 or 3, which are far more restrictive than what Congress intended. Also, regardless of alternative, we continue to oppose the eminent or future extension of the restrictive "Old Park" definition of "traditional" to the ANILCA park and preserve additions. This definition would remove Section 1110(a) protections from a variety of long-standing uses and activities that pre-date designation.

WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT

The State strongly objects to any proposals that extend formal Wilderness Act management requirements to areas outside designated Wilderness. The State recognizes that protecting

Response to Comments

Comments

wilderness values is an important management objective of the plan. ANILCA includes recognition of wilderness values generally, and Section 202(3) explicitly includes wilderness recreational activities as a specific purpose of Denali Park and Preserve. Nonetheless, only the original, pre-ANILCA portion of the Park is congressionally designated Wilderness. Therefore, only the Old Park should be managed in accordance with the Wilderness Act, as amended by ANILCA.

Under Section 1317(c) of ANILCA, the wilderness suitability review undertaken after the passage of ANILCA shall not *“be construed as affecting the administration of any unit of the National Park System or National Wildlife Refuges System in accordance with this Act or other applicable provisions of law unless and until Congress provides otherwise by taking action on any Presidential recommendation made pursuant to subsection (b) of this section.”* In the legislative history of ANILCA, Senate Energy Report 96-413 provides additional insight into this provision:

The Committee Amendment directs the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a wilderness review of those lands within National Parks, Monuments, and Wildlife Refuges not designated as Wilderness by this Act. This review shall be made pursuant to the Wilderness Act and completed within 5 years.

The Committee expects that the affected units will be managed and administered in accordance with the provisions of this Act and applicable law during the study period.

Therefore, Congress did not intend for the Service to manage these areas as designated Wilderness until Congress acts to designate.

The Denali Backcountry Plan states on page 21 that the Service will manage the park additions and preserve *“to maintain the wilderness character and values of the land under other authorities until designation recommendations have been proposed and Congress has acted on these proposals.”* This intent appears to stem from the Service’s national 2001 Management Policies regarding management of suitable and proposed wilderness. This policy states the *“National Park Service will take no action that would diminish the wilderness suitability of an area possessing wilderness characteristics until the legislative process of wilderness designation has been completed. Until that time, management decisions pertaining to lands qualifying as wilderness will be made in expectation of eventual wilderness designation.”*¹ When these national policies were in draft form, the State commented by seeking greater recognition of the statutory ANILCA exceptions.² Given that more than half of the National Park System is located in Alaska, we further requested consideration of a separate policy for Alaska. Most of our comments were not addressed in the Final Policies, so discrepancies with ANILCA remain.

We also understand the National Park Service is revising the national policies. We again request the Service revisit these fundamental questions about the management of parklands outside designated wilderness in Alaska. In the meantime, for purposes of the Denali Backcountry Plan,

¹ 2001 NPS Management Policies Section 6.3.1 (cited on page 21 of the Backcountry Plan)

² State letter to Loren Fraser, National Park Service, Washington D.C. March 20, 2000

Response to Comments

SoA-1

The Department of Interior Solicitor provided the National Park Service with guidance regarding ANILCA 1317(c), which concluded that this clause neither required nor prohibited the NPS from managing lands outside of designated wilderness to maintain wilderness character and values. Quoting from letter by David Watts, Assistant Solicitor, to Vernon Wiggins, Co-chairman of the Alaska Land Use Council, on May 21, 1986:

“Accordingly, it is clear from the statute and its legislative history that the Department...is not required to manage these areas as wilderness areas prior to an Act by Congress designating them as such. This does not preclude, however, the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service from managing them to maintain the wilderness character and values of the land under other Park and Refuge authorities until Congress has acted.”

The quotes from the Senate Committee report do not reflect on this fundamental interpretation. The National Park Service believes that Denali’s management history, public expectations, and ANILCA purposes, combined with management policies, all point to the conclusion that much of the park additions and preserve should be managed to maintain wilderness resource values and opportunities for wilderness recreation.

Comments

we request recognition that in cases where the national policies conflict with ANILCA, the statute prevails. We also seek satisfactory resolution of the following additional concerns.

2

Minimum Requirement/Minimum Tool: Administrative Activities

The common management proposal to implement the “*minimum requirement/minimum tool*” analysis throughout the “*entire park and preserve backcountry*” (page 58) is the foremost manifestation of our concern about wilderness management. This Wilderness Act process even extends to those lands that were not recommended for wilderness designation in 1988. As proposed, this process applies to all administrative and scientific activities, including management actions conducted by the State of Alaska. We do not object to the Service voluntarily applying this process to its own management activities. However, the State strongly objects to being required to follow this process outside designated wilderness as it could impact the State’s ability to fulfill its authorities and responsibilities, particularly for management of fish and wildlife. The latter state responsibilities are specifically acknowledged and protected in Section 1314 of ANILCA.

3

The relationship of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and the National Park Service is spelled out in the Master Memorandum of Understanding (MMOU). Service concerns with state management activities affecting fish and wildlife should be addressed within the context of this agreement, not through a separate, potentially burdensome, authorization process. As noted above, the State recognizes the presence of wilderness resources and values and is prepared to consider these and other park purposes through normal implementation of the MMOU. The MMOU calls for “notification” to the Service of state activities. In practice, ADF&G staff members are expected to contact the park *before* the activity takes place to insure opportunity for Service input.

Other state management activities (e.g. fire management) are similarly covered by various government-to-government agreements and processes, which provide sufficient opportunity for consultation to insure that park purposes and values are recognized without this additional requirement. Our concerns apply to academic and private researchers as well. For these entities, we request the Service address protection of all park resources and values through existing research permit requirements, thus relieving the Service from separately imposing the “minimum requirement/minimum tool” for wilderness values on non-Service entities.

4

Minimum Requirement/Minimum Tool: Commercial Services

We also object to applying the minimum requirement/minimum tool analysis to commercial service providers as proposed on page 56. Under the new Concessions law, those operating under commercial use authorizations as well as concession operations will undergo a rigorous process to be allowed to operate in any National Park Service administered area. As with non-Service administrative activities, we request that the Service use existing commercial service authorization mechanisms to address the resources and values identified in this plan.

5

Broader Recognition of Recreational Activities

The specific purposes of Denali Park and Preserve as listed in ANILCA Section 202(3) include “to provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities.” [Emphasis added.] Yet the

Response to Comments

SoA-2

The BCMP clarifies in Chapter 1 the proper hierarchy of statutes and policies.

SoA-3

The text of the preferred alternative has been revised to clarify that the minimum requirement instruction applies to administrative actions of the National Park Service. Management actions of the State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game within the boundaries of Denali National Park and Preserve should follow the intent and process of the Master Memorandum of Understanding, which includes timely consultation before management actions are scheduled so that both agencies can agree on methodologies that minimize adverse impacts to park resources and values.

SoA-4

The minimum requirement/minimum tool test is incorporated into the existing research permit process, so the State of Alaska’s concern is already addressed for present and future research permit applications from academic and private researchers.

SoA-5

The intent of this section of the BCMP was to explain how criteria implementing provisions of concessions law and NPS Management Policies were derived for Denali. The reference to minimum requirement has been removed from this section.

Comments

Backcountry Plan sometimes appears to focus primarily on protection of “wilderness values” to the apparent exclusion of other important purposes and uses such as wildlife viewing and recreation. We have identified several locations where this issue can be addressed:

Page ii, Purpose and Need, first sentence: We request revision to insure the plan does not inadvertently imply that protecting physical wilderness characteristics is more important than providing for the recreational activities listed in the purposes of the unit.

Page 3, last paragraph, second sentence: Consistent with the above comments, we request revision to recognize the important historical human uses of the unit.

Page 57, first bullet, third point: “They provide education relevant to preservation of wildlife, wilderness, and other resources and values.”

APPLICABLE LAWS, REGULATIONS AND POLICIES

In this portion of Chapter 1, we request recognition or clarification of the following additional applicable authorities:

Page 19, Off-Road Vehicle Access: Also note that 36 CFR Part 13.46 allows the use of snowmobiles, motorboats, dog teams, and other means of surface transportation traditionally employed by local rural residents for subsistence. Other means of surface transportation may include the use of off-road vehicles for subsistence.

Page 20, Closures and Public Use Limits, 36 CFR § 1.5: Revise to clarify that NPS regulations at 36 CFR Part 13.30 supercede the closure regulations at 36 CFR Part 1.5 for Alaskan park units.

Pages 21-22, Wilderness Management: Per our general comments, please clarify that when the national policies conflict with ANILCA, the statute prevails.

Pages 22-23, Guided Activities and Commercial Services. Recognize that ANILCA Section 1307 allows the continuation of existing visitor services and provides a preference for selecting visitor services, except guided sport fishing and hunting.

Page 23, Facilities. Also note that ANILCA Sections 1306 and 1310 allow administrative sites and facilities for administrative, navigation, or research purposes.

Page 25, Easement and Boundary Changes. Also note ANILCA Sections 103(b) and 1302 (including the 1302 amendment), address easement and boundary changes for most conservation system units in Alaska, including units managed by the National Park Service.

OTHER PAGE SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Page 27, Off-Road Vehicle Use. We disagree with the assertion that off-road vehicles (ORVs) are not authorized for subsistence purposes under Section 811 of ANILCA because they were not traditionally employed for subsistence purposes. Under Service

Response to Comments

SoA-6

The plan objectives have been clarified to include “protect and provide opportunities for wilderness recreational activities in the backcountry, including reasonable access.”

SoA-7

The Purpose and Need section of the Revised Draft plan contains many references to the important human uses of the unit. See, for example, p.7 and p.8 under Park Purpose, p.10 under Park Significance, and p.11 under Objectives, all of which are reiterated in the *Final EIS*. The statement on p.3 adequately reflects the point that NPS wanted to make regarding one of the key guiding principles for development of the *Revised Draft EIS*.

SoA-8

The language in this section is intended to provide the minimum condition necessary to meet the criteria specified in policy. While the National Park Service agrees that commercially guided activities should also seek to provide education about the broad array of park resources and values, the justification for having the activity in the backcountry is dependent upon education related specifically to wilderness resource values in keeping with the emphasis of the plan.

SoA-9

Language was added to chapter 1 as requested.

SoA-10

The NPS does not agree with this assertion. A memorandum from Deputy Regional Solicitor Dennis J. Hopewell on October 18, 2002, supported the NPS interpretation that 36 CFR 13.30 closure regulations apply only where specifically referenced in Part 13. The text in this section is consistent with that interpretation.

SoA-11

The general discussion of the hierarchy of statutes, regulation, and policy on pp.11-12 of the *Revised Draft EIS*, which is reiterated in the *Final EIS*, provides clarification for the public on this point.

Comments

regulations at 36 CFR 13.46, such subsistence use of ORVs is allowed unless closed through the regulatory process detailed in 13.46(a) through 13.46(c). Denali National Park and Preserve is currently evaluating eligible subsistence users traditional use of off-road vehicles in Cantwell and within the park in the Cantwell area. A finding that ORVs were traditionally employed is pending. It is therefore inaccurate for the Service to state that off-road vehicles are not authorized in the park or preserve.

Page 42, Table 2-1: Management Area Descriptions, Backcountry Hiker Management Area. Based on inquiries, we understand that the “No camping” provision in this proposal is intended to prevent people from camping directly on specified trails, rather than a nondescript area closure within the vicinity of the trails. In order for this provision to be meaningful to the public and enforceable by the Service, both the trail locations and portions affected need to be specifically defined. We do not support any closures that are not properly identified.

Page 46, Table 2-5: Natural Sound Disturbance. The text within the table and the notes that accompany this table fail to address the issue of noise generated from legal access methods provided through law and regulation. This text leads the reader to assume that motorized noise is automatically inappropriate within Denali backcountry, a conclusion that would not be consistent with ANILCA’s protections of motorized access. We request explanation in the table or “Notes” to recognize that legal motorized access and its associated sounds are not inherently inconsistent with management of the Denali backcountry. We also request inclusion of some descriptive narrative that better conveys a recognizable sound intensity represented by various decibel levels. For example, it would be helpful to associate decibel level ranges with the “three-part scale” referenced on page 137. In addition, the presentation would be more neutral if the Service replaced the term “noise” with “sound.”

Page 47, Table 2-6: Encounters with People. We recognize the Service’s efforts to better define encounter rates, and we appreciate Service recognition that the standards may need to be refined after 5 years. In the meantime we question whether the quantified encounter rates reasonably reflect the accompanying qualitative descriptions. In Corridors rated “Very High,” for example, encountering 10 or fewer parties a day does not seem to match up with “*may always be in sight and sound of other parties.*” At the other end of the spectrum in the “Very Low” encounter rate category, it seems unwise to state that “*Visitors can expect to encounter no other parties in these areas....*” A more realistic statement might be: “*Visitors are unlikely to encounter parties in these areas....*” Our concerns about encounter rates were first articulated in our letter of April 12, 2004. These standards are not yet adequate to support regulatory closures or restrictions under Section 1110(a).

Page 50, Access, General Guidance. We are aware that the Service has compiled a substantial amount of information for this plan related to historical activities and access. Based on our understanding of the methodology, we are concerned that the data may be limited in scope and incomplete. The State has long held that a documented understanding of pre-ANILCA public use is essential to properly identify and manage access for “traditional activities” under Section 1110(a) and “means of surface transportation traditionally employed” under Section 811. When the original GMPs were completed by the Service and subsequently approved by the Alaska Land Use Council, it was understood by all state and federal participants that the Service did not

Response to Comments

SoA-12

Language was added to chapter 1 as requested.

SoA-13

Language was added to chapter 1 as requested.

SoA-14

Language was added to chapter 1 as requested.

SoA-15

At the time the *Revised Draft EIS* was written, the text was correct. A new finding that concluded ORVs were traditionally employed in parts of the park additions near Cantwell has since been published. Information in chapter 1 has been updated accordingly.

SoA-16

Management area designations reference specific trails identified in chapter 3, which include both a width and a length. The management area designation applies only to the trail surface itself.

SoA-17

It is important to recognize that allowed uses can and do cause adverse impacts to park resources. Much as hiking can cause trampling and erosion to plants and soils, the use of motorized equipment for access to traditional activities causes noise impacts to the natural sound environment. It is important for the BCMP to acknowledge these adverse impacts and seek to minimize them while allowing for legal use of the area. Congress recognized this fact by providing for reasonable regulation to “protect the natural and other values of conservation system units,” and went further to provide for closure to special access if it would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit (ANILCA Section 1110(a)).

SoA-18

Clarifications have been made in Table 2-6 to address these concerns.

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Comments

have a sufficient knowledge base to include the access plan required by Section 1301(b)(4). Therefore, National Park Service Regional Director Boyd Evison made a commitment to conduct comprehensive studies of pre-ANILCA access and activities in cooperation with the State. The ADF&G, with cooperation from the Service, completed a successful study of pre-ANILCA activities for the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. We request an opportunity to review the objectives and methodology of the current data gathering effort. The Backcountry Plan is essentially designed to conclude the required Section 1301(b)(4) element of the original GMP, and therefore must be based on complete and accurate information.

Page 50, Access, General Guidance, second paragraph. We recommend separating the excellent “tools” discussion from the general access section. While all of the tools have some possible application to access, a number of them also apply to other subjects (e.g. human waste disposal) unrelated to access. 19

Pages 51-52, Registration and Permit Systems. We request clarification that mandatory registration and public use permit requirements can only be implemented through regulation. We do not support mandatory registration if the sole purpose is to gather public use data – especially in the park additions – when less burdensome methods are available through commercial use providers, survey cards, and/or periodic sampling studies. We support use of less restrictive measures to meet identified standards before implementing registration or permit systems. 20

Page 54, Group Size. We request the plan clarify that rulemaking pursuant to ANILCA Section 1110(a) is necessary to implement group size limits for non-commercial activities. 21

Pages 59-60, Adaptive Management. To explain the implementation of “ongoing monitoring” and adaptive management, we recommend the Service develop a step-down comprehensive monitoring plan to supplement tables 2-2 through 2-9 in Chapter 2. The monitoring plan should be made available for public review. In the meantime, we request the final backcountry plan outline the general purpose and content of the monitoring plan, including: 22

- a statement of objectives for both overall and site specific monitoring,
- what characteristics the Service intends to monitor,
- sampling strategies, techniques or procedures for data analysis, and
- criteria used to develop conclusions.

Page 60, Adaptive Management, second paragraph, fourth bullet. We recommend this bullet be revised so that there is no misunderstanding that a process is required to implement such closures. Any closures under the annual backcountry operational management plan must also undergo the closure procedures under 43 CFR Part 36.11 for ANILCA Section 1110(a) access, 36 CFR Part 13.46 for subsistence access, and 36 CFR Part 13.30 for other activities. 23

Pages 61-62 and page 66, Access under Alternatives 2 and 3. We strongly object to extending application of the Old Denali Park definition of “traditional activities” (36 CFR Part 13.63(h)) to any ANILCA designated unit or addition. We also object to any efforts to legislatively exempt the “Old Park” from the access provisions of ANILCA Section 1110(a) – as proposed under Alternative 3. See also first comment for page 50.

Response to Comments

SoA-19

The National Park Service agrees that many of the access management tools could be used to address topics that are not directly access-related. However, listing the tools was not necessary in order for the National Park Service to employ any of the authorities or methods described. The list is important in this context only as an articulation of the NPS access management strategy for the Denali backcountry, which is a central point of concern for the plan. Separating the “tools” discussion would require some changes in the list and dilute the desired emphasis on access. Listing the tools in this section in no way compromises the ability of the National Park Service to use the tools appropriately in other contexts.

SoA-20

The modified preferred alternative includes an Implementation section that identifies required regulations, including regulations for any new registration or permit requirements.

SoA-21

Table 2-13 has been added to address implementation requirements, including the identification of necessary regulatory changes.

SoA-22

A Monitoring Plan that includes the elements listed will be an important component of plan implementation. The National Park Service is committed to involving the public in development of the monitoring plan. It is one item identified specifically for consideration by the Backcountry Implementation Citizens Advisory Committee, which will serve as the chartered Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) group to advise the National Park Service on various aspects of the plan implementation.

SoA-23

Appropriate regulations and procedures for closures are thoroughly addressed in chapter 1. Text in the adaptive management section indicates regulation could be required for implementing portions of the backcountry operational management plan.

Comments

Pages 72 and 76, Access, Alternatives 4 and 5. Unlike Alternatives 2 and 3, there is no language stating that “access will be managed using the tools identified under Actions Common to All Action Alternatives.” Since the tools are listed as common to all alternatives, we assume this omission is an oversight in the text that can easily be clarified in the final plan. We also request clarification that any future access closures proposed in response to the changes in desired future conditions will be implemented through separate rulemaking.

Page 72, Access, second paragraph. We do not see a sufficient need for broadly applied registration requirements for overnight use in the park additions and winter day use east of the Kahiltna Glacier. Compliance would be burdensome and other, less restrictive methods are available for data gathering.

Pages 80-81, Shelters and cabins. In the section Alternatives Considered But Rejected, we take issue with several aspects of this discussion. First, the majority of the planning area is outside designated wilderness; thus the reference to “within wilderness areas” is misleading at best, and furthers our concern that the park is attempting to manage the entire backcountry the same as designated wilderness. Second, contrary to the text, ANILCA Section 1303(3) does provide for the construction of cabins for public use on all parklands, regardless of their status as designated wilderness, even though we recognize the park is not required to do so. Furthermore, the purpose is not limited to public safety. Third, the discussion does not recognize the State’s original request in our previous comments for consideration of such public use cabins.

Page 82, Summary Table of Alternatives. The text describing the size of the areas in Alternatives 3 and 4 have been noted incorrectly. Alternative 3 should read “...the areas would be the minimum necessary to provide these experiences based on present demand...” and Alternative 4 should read “The areas would be of sufficient size to accommodate anticipated growth in the next 20 years...”

Page 105, Map of proposed land exchange. The State conceptually supports consideration of the proposed land exchange involving the boundary between the state and parklands in the vicinity of the Tokositna and Coffee rivers. It is not a high priority for the State in light of other exchange activity elsewhere in the state; therefore we would need substantial Service assistance to facilitate the public involvement and other statutory requirements associated with implementing any land exchange.

Chapter 3

Pages 121-132, Wildlife. Section 1314 of ANILCA confirms that the State of Alaska retains authority to manage fish and wildlife on public lands. Clarification of this role and a commitment to cooperate in related matters is addressed in the Master Memorandum of Understanding between the Service and ADF&G. We request that the respective roles of the Service and State, and a Service commitment to cooperation, be fully recognized in the text. We also recommend the Service provide a copy of the Master Memorandum of Understanding as an appendix in the final plan.

Response to Comments

SoA-24

The suggested clarification was made in the modified preferred alternative.

SoA-25

The State is correct that ANILCA Section 1303(3) provides the authority for the construction of new cabins if “the use is necessary to reasonably accommodate subsistence uses or is otherwise authorized by law.” Section 1315(d) limits that authority, however, in designated wilderness to cabins “necessary for the protection of the public health and safety.” As stated on page 441 of the *Revised Draft EIS*, public scoping did not identify this as an issue needing resolution in the plan. With regard to the 1980 ANILCA park and preserve additions, the National Park Service would be conservative about new cabin construction due to the purposes for the additions stated in Titles I and II of ANILCA, that include, among others: to preserve wilderness resource values and to provide opportunities for wilderness recreation activities. The National Park Service has evaluated over 99% of the 1980 additions as being suitable for wilderness designation and has the responsibility to preserve the congressional option to so designate. To help provide for wilderness recreation activities, the National Park Service agreed to partner with the State to construct six cabins along the southern border of Denali National Park, and would further encourage the State and other entities to take advantage of any similar perceived need adjacent to other parklands.

SoA-26

This typographic error was corrected in the tables in the *Final EIS*.

SoA-27

The Master Memorandum of Understanding clarifies the roles of the State of Alaska and NPS in fish and wildlife management. The Master Memorandum was included in the 1986 *General Management Plan* (GMP), which remains current for topics not addressed in this limited GMP amendment.

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Comments

Page 133, Natural Soundscapes, paragraph 5. Consistent with our comments on page 46, we are concerned by reference to the statement in Director’s Order #47 that “*noise is generally defined as an unwanted or undesired sound, often unpleasant in quality, intensity or repetition.*” We recognize that maintaining natural sound is an important goal for many visitors, but some human caused sound is necessary to conduct legally allowed activities. To address this concern, we request the next sentence in this paragraph be revised as follows: “Noise may often be the byproduct of desirable or legally authorized activities or machines, but it still subject to management to protect park resources.”

Page 140, Backcountry Visitor Use, second paragraph. The State opposes extension of the backcountry unit and quota system outside the Old Park. The basis for the original system does not fit with the realities of backcountry use in the ANILCA additions and the access protections under Sections 811 and 1110(a).

Page 141, Wilderness Suitability and Proposal. Consistent with our general comments above about wilderness, we disagree that lands suitable for wilderness designation must be managed “as wilderness” under the 2001 NPS Management Policies.

Pages 143-146, Subsistence. This is a well-written and informative section and responds to most of our recommendations on the previous draft plan in 2003. However, we note several minor errors in the text. First, we recommend the Service amend the final sentence on page 144 to show that Telida was also among the communities covered in the Stokes 1984 publication. The ADF&G, Division of Subsistence also conducted research in other Parks Highway communities, both north and south of the park. We recommend citing the following study, which described subsistence activities in Lake Minchumina as of the mid-1970s in what was then the proposed north addition to the park:

Bishop, Richard H., 1978. Subsistence Resource Use in the Proposed North Addition to Mt. McKinley National Park. Anthropology and Historic Preservation, Cooperative Park Studies Unit, Occasional Paper No. 17. University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Page 168, Backpacking, second paragraph. We continue to object to the annual compendium requirement that all users carry bear proof containers in most backcountry units in the Old Park, especially if no perishable food is being carried and the campers are well away from the park road or bear concentration areas. Not all areas of the Old Park have the same use patterns or bear concentration areas found in selected popular hiking areas adjacent to the park road. Instead, we recommend that food storage be addressed in the same manner as other park backcountry areas by keeping the focus on prohibiting animal attractants and enforcing existing state law (5 AAC 92.230 Feeding of Game), in combination with an education program and the continued availability of containers for loan from the park. This issue has been discussed outside the context of the backcountry management plan so we recommend some recognition that revised guidance may be developed separately in the future.

Page 178, Sport Hunting. This section incorrectly implies that all hunting on the preserve regulated by the State’s Board of Game is “sport” hunting. In fact, the state hunting regulations provide for general hunting (including subsistence) through resident and non-resident seasons.

Response to Comments

SoA-28

This change was made on the chapter 3 Errata sheet. See also SOA-17.

SoA-29

These changes were made on the chapter 3 Errata sheet and on the Bibliography Errata sheet.

SoA-30

ANILCA Section 1313 specifically provides for the “taking of fish and wildlife for sport purposes and subsistence uses” within National Preserves. Non-subsistence fishing and hunting is regulated in the preserves under the State of Alaska’s general hunting regulations. As a result, whenever the plan refers to the ANILCA-authorized activity it refers to “sport hunting” or “sport fishing,” but whenever the reference is to the State’s regulation it refers to “general hunting.”

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Comments

Further, rural and non-Alaska residents currently can hunt on preserve lands. We recommend use of the term “general hunting” when not specifically referring to subsistence.

Page 188, Snowmachines, first paragraph. We request clarification that, depending on the final alternative selected, the Service may not need to define “traditional activities” at this time. We also continue to request the document reflect Congressional intent to protect Alaskan activities occurring at the time of passage of ANILCA, recognizing that reasonable regulatory processes are available to protect park resources without unnecessary limitations on the types of activities.

Page 188, Off-Road Vehicles (ORVs). See comment regarding page 27. Under NPS regulations at 36 CFR 13.46, ORV use that was traditionally employed for subsistence purposes is allowed unless closed by regulation. 31

Page 205, Backcountry Management During Winter, first paragraph. The State maintains a longstanding objection to requiring camping permits in the winter and in remote areas where overcrowding, competition, or resource protection are not significant issues and when the minor benefits of permits are outweighed by the burdens imposed on the user. Congress intended that permits be avoided whenever possible. We request the Service delete this requirement during periods and in locations where visitor use is not impacting resources.

Chapter 4

Page 216, Assumptions, #10. We question the relevance of the statement that the majority of [snowmachine] use within park boundaries does not have characteristics that would meet the definition of “traditional activities” presently applied in the Old Park and therefore request its deletion. In light of the different conditions and historical use patterns between the “Old Park” and the ANILCA additions, this statement is presented without appropriate context and implies that these differences are automatically problematic. 32

Page 232, Trampling and Damage. We recommend the Service include more information from the study conducted by Ms. Kathryn Tietz regarding impacts of trampling on summer and winter vegetation in interior Alaska taiga ecosystems. Of all the studies cited in the text, this study has the greatest relevance to Denali National Park and Preserve ecosystems. 33

Page 258, Ungulates, second paragraph. The statements in the second paragraph attributed to Mr. Griesse are incomplete regarding ADF&G’s information on impacts to moose willow habitat in the Talkeetna Mountains. Further information from ADF&G reveals such information is anecdotal. 34

Page 274, Alternative 4 and **Page 277**, Alternative 5. Based on the cited examples, it appears overly simplistic to attribute minor to moderate adverse impacts to wildlife populations and habitats under Alternatives 4 and 5 strictly to increased snowmachine and motorboat use. Since Alternatives 4 and 5 increase overall recreation in the park, both motorized and non-motorized, we request a more comprehensive statement such as: “*there would generally be minor to moderate adverse impacts to wildlife populations and habitats under Alternative 4 because of impacts from increased recreation use, both motorized and non-motorized.*” 35

Response to Comments

SoA-31

See response above. Clarifications as to the status of ORV use for subsistence use at Denali were made on the chapter 3 Errata sheet.

SoA-32

This statement was necessary in order to analyze the impacts of defining “traditional activities” as presented in Alternatives 2 and 3, which would define the term with the same language used for the Old Park. The implications of the statement only apply to the impact analysis for those two alternatives.

SoA-33

For winter trampling, the study by Kathryn Tietz (Tietz 1996) is important because it was conducted in Alaska. However, the usefulness of the study is limited because no measurements of the vegetation that was actually subjected to snowmachine traffic were taken prior to applying the use. The assessment that there was no damage was based on an extrapolation from surrounding vegetation. No measurements were taken to see if the compacted snow observed in the experimental treatment trails remained on the vegetation longer than the snow that was adjacent to the trail. Also, no soil temperature data were collected. The results of this work are not sufficient to say conclusively that the impacts observed in other areas would not also occur in Alaska.

For summer trampling, the National Park Service has conducted research at Denali that is the most relevant to the ecosystems in the park. This research is cited in the Vegetation section of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences.

SoA-34

The information attributed to Herman Griesse is appropriately cited as personal communication, not as a scientific study. These observations from a professional biologist are only one source of many that describe potential impacts on wildlife from snowmachine use.

SoA-35

The concluding analysis for wildlife impacts for the modified preferred alternative in the *Final EIS*, which closely follows Alternative 4, was modified to make it clear that non-motorized recreational activities have some effect on wildlife as well. However, most of the serious concerns cited in the text are related to motorized access.

Comments

Page 281, Natural Soundscapes. Consistent with previous comments, we request this section also recognize that much of the “noise” generated within the park is from legally authorized access methods under the provisions of ANILCA.

Pages 309-331, Wilderness Resources. See general comments above about wilderness management. In particular we reiterate our concern that the document appears to be using national policies to “trump” the statutory provisions of ANILCA.

Pages 332-355, Subsistence Resources and Opportunities. The Methodology section on page 332 states that, “This analysis assumes that adverse impacts to subsistence resources and opportunities from subsistence uses are negligible because subsistence use is very low, especially compared to recreational use of the park.” However, the next 20+ pages detail an array of “major adverse effects,” “moderate adverse effects,” and “adverse effects” that are projected for each of the five alternatives. Similarly, Table 2-11 (page 95) summarizing the projected environmental consequences of each planning alternative, states that the Preferred Alternative “would create unfavorable conditions for subsistence wildlife populations and increase conflicts between recreational and subsistence users.” The cumulative impacts of all alternatives on subsistence are projected to be “major.” Based on the detailed and candid assessment presented concerning the potential adverse effects to subsistence for each alternative, we respectfully disagree that the potential for adverse effects is “negligible.” We request the final plan address this discrepancy.

In addition, we recommend the plan be explicit in explaining how the Service will mitigate or avoid adverse effects and cumulative effects on subsistence. For example, Cantwell residents need to know how the Service will address continuing increases in recreational use in areas they have used and continue to use for hunting and trapping in the park additions.

Page 348, continuing paragraph about Kantishna. We strongly object to the suggestion that the Service may expand the current firearm closure period in the Kantishna area. The State opposes restrictions on valid subsistence uses that favor expanding seasonal visitor uses. As stated in our comments on the original Kantishna firearm restrictions (January 2000 letter to then Superintendent Steve Martin), the Service must “*guard against management decisions which treat legally-authorized subsistence uses secondarily to non-consumptive uses.*” Although only a small number of qualified local rural residents currently subsistence hunt in the Kantishna area, the area is open for subsistence uses and could be used more frequently in the future. Qualified local rural residents should not continue to see their opportunities to legally conduct subsistence activities in the park additions and preserve reduced in favor of further accommodating recreational users. Extending the firearm closure period would be another incremental step toward effectively eliminating subsistence uses altogether in portions of the park additions in order to accommodate seasonal visitors and recreational users. The State recognizes public safety issues in its hunting regulations that prohibit shooting across and from highways, etc. Any additional firearm restrictions that respond to public safety concerns must be substantiated and must be the minimum necessary.

Response to Comments

SoA-36

The text in this section introduces the topic for purposes of analysis and in no way implies that “noise” in the park is illegal. This topic has been explored elsewhere in the plan (see, for example, chapter 3 Errata sheet and SoA-17).

SoA-37

This statement reflected the impact only of subsistence uses on other subsistence uses. The text is still clear that major adverse cumulative affects to subsistence resources and opportunities have occurred and would still occur under the preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* and the modified preferred alternative of the *Final EIS*.

SoA-38

The modified preferred alternative contains two specific management area changes designed to mitigate impacts to subsistence use: reducing the intensity of visitor impacts in the Kantishna Hills and the southern park additions east of Bull River. The new standards for encounter rates, natural sound disturbance, and other indicators in these areas should trigger management action that would prevent further deterioration in subsistence resources and opportunities. In addition, the Broad Pass visitor contact station would be used to convey information to non-subsistence users about how and where to travel to avoid adversely affecting subsistence users in the Cantwell area, where the most severe impacts occur.

SoA-39

In the analysis of impacts from the modified preferred alternative, the text is clarified to indicate that an extension of the firearms closure would be a risk in allowing the level of visitor use and facility development identified in the modified preferred alternative, but not a certainty. Visitor safety remains an important NPS concern, and the presence of private land in the Kantishna area reduces the ability of the National Park Service to control visitor use levels in the road-accessible portions of Kantishna.

Comments

Page 397, Recreational Opportunity, first full paragraph, third sentence. We recommend the Service delete this sentence because not all “recreational use” would be prohibited and because Section 1110(a) is a minimum guarantee, not a limiting condition.

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Page 401, Recreational Opportunity, first full paragraph, third sentence. Comment for page 397, above, applies to this page as well.

Chapter 5

Pages 420-425, Consultation and Coordination. We note that the plan and particularly this section, does not describe the hearing and participation requirements found in ANILCA Section 1301(d). This section of ANILCA allows various state and federal agencies, native corporations, and interested stakeholders to participate in development, preparation, and revision of conservation system unit plans. We recommend the Service include recognition of Section 1301(d) in the text of the final plan, including the commitment in the General Management Plan (page 155) that such consultation extends to subsequent step down plans.

41

Appendices

Pages 492-510, Appendix C: ANILCA Section 810(a) Summary of Evaluation and Findings: This analysis reiterates information presented elsewhere in the plan, and appropriately indicates how some potential impacts to subsistence could be avoided or mitigated. However, we recommend the authors review the information in the 810 analysis with the “Affected Environment” and “Environmental Consequences” sections to ensure that consistent information is being presented throughout the plan. See also our comments regarding pages 332-355.

Page 516-519, Appendix E. It appears the Service created the Minimum Requirement Procedure in the plan for use specifically in Denali National Park and Preserve. Consistent with our May 5, 2004 comments to the Arthur Carhart Center regarding the national, interagency “Minimum Requirement Decision Guide,” Denali’s proposed process does not reasonably recognize the obvious statutory exceptions to the Wilderness Act found in ANILCA. For example, question #4 on page 516 should specifically mention ANILCA as a source of special statutory guidance that may allow a specific activity that would not normally be allowed in designated Wilderness. Also, this question should more appropriately be placed as the first or second question in the Procedure prompts.

42

Page 543, Bibliography. “Haynes, Simeone, and Andersen” is the correct spelling of the authors’ names in this citation.

Thank you for the opportunity to review this revised draft. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Sally Gibert
ANILCA Program Coordinator

Response to Comments

SoA-40

The sentence was edited in the analysis of the modified preferred alternative to indicate an exclusion of “non-consumptive” uses rather than “recreational activities.” These sentences are part of an analysis of impacts to recreational opportunities from Alternatives 4, 5, and the modified preferred alternative. This statement is an important qualifier to the previous sentence, which indicates that there would be ongoing opportunities to use snowmachines for access to traditional activities. The provisions of the modified preferred alternative do not necessarily protect recreational snowmachine access. If the term “traditional activities” were ever defined similar to the way it is defined in the Old Park, existing NPS regulations would in fact prohibit recreational use of snowmachines without a special regulation to protect such use.

SoA-41

Although Section 1301(d) of ANILCA was not specifically cited in chapter 5, the National Park Service exceeded all the requirements in this section. This plan does not amend p.155 (appendix A) of the GMP, which remains in effect.

SoA-42

The text in chapter 2 has been clarified to indicate that the minimum requirement tool presented in appendix E is an example of the type of tool that could be utilized by the National Park Service, not necessarily the worksheet that would always be used. The National Park Service expects the questionnaire to evolve over time and respond to particular needs in Alaska wilderness areas and Denali in particular.

Comments

Formal action on the Revised Draft Denali Backcountry Management Plan from the June 28, 2005 Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting

Motion: by Vernon Carlson to make subsistence a priority over other backcountry uses in the backcountry plan. Percy Duyck seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously 1

Justification: Rather than single out particular areas that are important to subsistence, subsistence should be made a priority throughout the ANILCA additions because subsistence use areas can change, and because this way no one's prime use area will be excluded.

Motion: by Ray Collins that the following points be recognized in the Backcountry Management Plan: 2

1. Identify management zones that specifically recognize subsistence as a purpose/priority in those areas. These management zones should be applied to areas presently used, and adapted to should changes in subsistence use patterns occur in the future.
2. The plan should contain more specific guidance on the management of conflicts between subsistence and recreational use.

Jeralyn Hath seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

Motion: by Ray Collins requesting that the NPS hold a formal discussion on the management of conflicts between subsistence and recreational uses of park lands, and to draft guidelines to aid in decision making when those conflicts occur. Percy Duyck seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

Response to Comments

SRC-1

ANILCA Section 202(3)(a) specifies that subsistence uses by local residents "shall be permitted in the additions to the park where such uses are traditional," and Section 810 requires certain criteria to be met before a Federal agency takes an action that would "significantly restrict subsistence uses." However, there is no legal provision that would allow for subsistence to be prioritized above non-consumptive uses.

SRC-2

The modified preferred alternative does not prioritize subsistence use in any management area. However, to reduce future conflicts between subsistence and other uses the southern Kantishna Hills and the Broad Pass area east of the Bull River were designated Management Area B to keep recreational visitor impacts low and relatively dispersed compared to Management Area A. Keeping visitor intensity low should minimize the number of conflicts. When conflicts do occur, the National Park Service would utilize the tools described under the Access section of chapter 2. See also SoA-38.

Comments



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
PACIFIC AIR FORCES

Superintendent
Attn: Denali Backcountry Management Plan
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Colonel Jerry I. Siegel
Commander, 611 Air Operations Group
9480 Pease Avenue, Ste 102
Elmendorf AFB, AK 99506-2100

Dear Mr. Anderson,

As the airspace director for the Air Force in Alaska, we are sensitive to land management issues involving activity below the Alaskan military training airspace. The southern section of Denali National Park lies under a portion of Suisna Military Operations Area (MOA), classified by the FAA as Special Use Airspace.

First, let me congratulate you, your park planning staff and the regional Park Service staff for their continued close cooperative work, both with this project and the 11th Air Force Resource Protection Council (RPC). Particularly, we thank Mr. Tranel and Mr. Loeb for keeping our staff informed as this project has developed over the past 20+ months. We are writing to comment favorably to the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). We want to make one suggestion. The draft makes reference in several places to forming a working group for achieving desired conditions in the park as affected by aircraft. You could delete the "military" reference in these locations for the following reason. The 1997 Alaska MOA EIS Record of Decision formed the RPC to address inter-agency issues such as this. That consultation process is established and working very well. In fact we think it is a national model. So to put it succinctly, we are already there. There is no need to invite additional military participation. Duplication would only serve to confuse resource managers.

Two corrections or clarifications need to be addressed. In Chapter 3, Transportation & Access section (page 230), Suisna MOA use is mentioned. We assume the data comes from the MOA EIS. In fact we have found that our use is much less than predicted. If you assume 1hr per sortie, the EIS predicted about 3,600 hrs per year (based on 15 sorties/day and 240 days/yr). Last year we used the MOA only 926 hours (75% less). The same paragraph lists the MOA as an "operating" area. It's actually spelled as an "operations" area.

1

Response to Comments

USAF-1

This information is included in the chapter 3 Errata sheet.

Comments

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. As you might expect, my staff and their families and friends take great delight in having such a treasure so close to Anchorage and Fairbanks. The park is a national asset in whose stewardship we take honor in being partly responsible.

Sincerely,


JERRY I. SIEGEL, Colonel, USAF

cc:
11 AF/CV
611 ASG/CC
NPS AK Region, Judith Gottlieb

Response to Comments

Comments

**National Parks Conservation Association, The Wilderness Society
Alaska Center For The Environment, Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition,
Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Trustees For Alaska,
Natural Resources Defense Council, Denali Citizens Council**

16 June 2005

Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park & Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Dear Superintendent Anderson,

On behalf of the above named organizations, I submit the attached People For Parks Alternative to the Revised Draft Denali Backcountry Management Plan. Development of this plan started soon after many of us had read key chapters and felt that the range of alternatives offered by the Park Service did not reflect the conservation community's desires or our legal interpretation for how best to manage Denali National Park & Preserve.

We are providing the People For Parks Alternative as a better future for Denali and are asking grassroots park activists across the country to support it. We are providing this outline to you in advance of sharing it with park activists so you will have the detail in-hand when the comments begin to arrive.

You can expect additional, more detailed comments from us as the comment deadline approaches. The quality of these detailed comments and the extent of our ability to generate public comments on the Denali Plan would be significantly increased with a two-week extension on the comment deadline.

If you have questions about this People's Alternative, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Joan Frankevich
Alaska Program Manager
National Parks Conservation Association

Response to Comments

Comments

People for Parks Alternative: A Better Future for Denali

Denali Backcountry Management Plan
June 2005

The *People for the Parks Alternative* uses a combination of the proposed alternatives as outlined in the chart below. The goal of the People's Alternative is to keep Denali National Park an intact and naturally functioning ecosystem for hundreds of years to come while giving backcountry users outstanding opportunities to observe wildlife while finding refuge from the bustle of the everyday world. Additionally, the People's Alternative emphasizes the following points.

- **Use the Precautionary Principle** – The National Park Service Organic Act directs parks to be managed so that the scenery, natural and historic objects and wildlife are left “*unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.*” This plan's style of management based on “desired future conditions” may sometimes delay action until after damage occurs. In order to fulfill the congressional mandate of the Organic Act, this plan needs strengthening to give park managers the authority to act easily and decisively before park resources are impacted, not after.
- **Emphasis on a Quality Visitor Experience** – We support and endorse the plan's emphasis on intangible values such as the ability to experience solitude in an untrammelled landscape where the sounds of nature predominate. These values are necessary to preserve Denali's wilderness character for future generations of backcountry users. It is the Park Service's responsibility to manage the park for these values.
- **Determine Funding and Details for Monitoring Program First** - Before adoption of this plan, it is imperative NPS has a detailed and fully funded monitoring program developed with public involvement. This plan also needs to detail how NPS will monitor and enforce the stipulations of this plan if little or no additional funding is made available.
- **Do Not Authorize Recreational Snowmobiling** - Alternatives 3, 4, and 5 allow recreational snowmobiling in the park additions and preserve. Recreational snowmobiling is illegal in Denali, damages park resources, and must not be authorized in this plan. To accomplish this the definition for traditional activities currently in use for the Old Park needs to be extended to the 1980 Park Additions and Preserve.
- **Complete the Wilderness Recommendation** - As required by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) the Park Service conducted a wilderness review in 1988 and concluded that approximately 3.73 million additional acres were suitable to be designated as Wilderness. NPS must fulfill its ANILCA obligation to complete the process by having the President forward its recommendation to Congress. In the meantime, NPS can take no action to either diminish the wilderness suitability of the area or reduce the probability of a wilderness designation.

Response to Comments

PfP-1

The People for Parks alternative combines elements from several different alternatives and proposes one additional element (wilderness recommendations) that was considered by the National Park Service during scoping but rejected from inclusion within this plan. The People for Parks alternative cannot be considered a complete alternative, since it did not address many important topics including management area descriptions, indicators and standards, and general guidance for commercial services and wilderness management. For the purpose of response, the National Park Service has treated the alternative as a set of substantive comments on several key issues of concern.

PfP-2

The National Park Service agrees with the precautionary principle described here. Chapter 1 of the *Final EIS* clearly establishes the ability and responsibility of the National Park Service to take action before unacceptable harm to park resources occurs. The language of chapter 2 provides the tools the National Park Service would use. The National Park Service does not have to wait for conditions to match or exceed standards before taking management action. An expectation that conditions would exceed standards is sufficient to motivate a management response.

PfP-3

The National Park Service agrees with the importance of intangible values at Denali. These values are articulated in chapter 1, and the plan commits the agency to protecting them.

PfP-4

The BCMP is a GMP amendment that sets out broad parameters for how the park should be managed. It provides goals and some specific guidance about how those goals should be reached, and identifies the additional work and funding that would be necessary to achieve the plan goals. The role of this plan is to provide the basis for the National Park Service to develop an appropriate monitoring plan and to pursue funding and program development to implement it.

response continued next page

Comments

| Category | Alternative | Explanation/Rationale |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|---|
| <u>General Concept</u> | 2 | Denali should continue to be managed as a wilderness park with non-motorized opportunities for wilderness experiences that are markedly different than surrounding public lands. |
| <u>Motorized Access</u> | 2/3 modified | Apply the definition of <i>traditional activities</i> currently used in the Old Park to the entire Park & Preserve. |
| <u>Registration</u> | 2 | We support convenient registration for all backcountry day users in order to provide park managers with information for better management. |
| <u>Climbing Limits</u> | 3 | We agree that a modest increase of climbers over current levels to 1500 to be reevaluated in 10 years is a needed and reasonable limit. |
| <u>Commercial Airplane Landings</u> | 3/4 modified | In order to support a range of mountaineering experiences that includes some climbing areas free from the noise and intrusion of scenic air tours we support the language in Alternative 4 modified as follows (<i>changes in italics</i>): Allow scenic air tour landings on glaciers in all areas designated as Management Area A, <i>except scenic tour landings would not be allowed on the Eldridge Glacier, Little Switzerland or the Ramparts. Scenic air tour landings would be restricted to 9 am to 9 pm.</i> |
| <u>Commercial Guided Hiking</u> | 3/4 modified | We support the guided hiking options in Alternative 3 with the following modifications: <i>No guided backpacking should be allowed in the Kantishna Hills until there is a comprehensive plan for management of the Kantishna region.</i> Only educational programs should use the entrance area trails, with the exception of the trails listed in Alternative 4 which could be used for guided hiking. |
| <u>Guided Sport Hunting</u> | 2 | Retain the status quo. |
| <u>Other Commercial Activities</u> | 2 | Retain the status quo. |

7

Response to Comments

PfP-5

The modified preferred alternative does not specifically authorize recreational snowmachining and there is no change to the types of activities for which snowmachines may be used. ANILCA Section 1110(a) allows snowmachine use “for traditional activities” and ANILCA Section 811(b) allows appropriate use of snowmachines for subsistence purposes if traditionally employed. Both are specifically subject to reasonable regulation. Because the term “traditional activities” is not defined in statute or regulation, there is no means to determine whether existing snowmachine use is legal or illegal under present regulation. For the purposes of the modified preferred alternative, it is not necessary to make a decision on this issue. The modified preferred alternative sets specific standards for resource and social conditions for the various management areas of the park. For the National Park Service, the priority for backcountry management would be to ensure that the standards are met. If standards are not achieved or conditions are deteriorating in part or in whole because of snowmachine access, a logical first step for the National Park Service to address the issue might be to determine through a rule-making which park visitors are using snowmachines for traditional activities and which are not.

PfP-6

As described in chapters 1 and 3 of the BCMP, the National Park Service completed a wilderness suitability review and prepared a proposal for the Secretary of Interior as directed by ANILCA Section 1317. Although the process specified by Section 1317 was not completed, there is no additional action that could be taken by the National Park Service at this time that would advance the process in the absence of congressional interest.

PfP-7

Under the modified preferred alternative, scenic air tour landings would not be allowed in the Ramparts. Although scenic air tour landings could occur on the Pika or Eldridge Glaciers, management area standards would not allow nearly the same number of landings as occur on the Ruth Glacier. Additionally, the text of the plan establishes clearly that these glaciers would be secondary landing areas to be used only when landing locations in Management Area A are unavailable, and landings would be discouraged whenever climbers and mountaineers are present. Scenic air tour landings would be restricted to 9am to 9pm.

Comments

| | | |
|------------------------------------|------------|--|
| <u>Trails</u> | 4 | While we support the “no formal trails” policy for Denali’s backcountry we recognize that several unplanned social trails exist and that park resources are best protected by constructing trails as needed in the areas listed in Alternative 4. We assume EAs will be written and the public involved when any trail construction moves forward in the park. |
| <u>Park Road</u> | no choice | We support improved access for non-motorized winter sports such as cross-country skiing, ski-joring, and dog mushing. Any combination of alternatives 1-4 that achieves this goal and is amenable to local users is acceptable. |
| <u>Campsites</u> | 2 modified | We recommend no campsites be designated in the Kantishna Hills as they are not needed at this time. If resource damage appears to be imminent, then NPS should look at options ranging from closing the site to hardening it and creating a designated campsite. |
| <u>Shelters and Cabins</u> | 3 | We support facilities at the park entrance that promote opportunities for non-motorized winter recreation. |
| <u>Information Facilities</u> | 3 modified | We don’t support a new facility in the Cantwell/Broad Pass area unless there is a demonstrated need. We recommend changing “ <i>would operate</i> ” to “ <i>could operate</i> ”. |
| <u>Administrative Camps</u> | 3 | Retain the status quo. |
| <u>Information & Education</u> | 3 modified | We support the educational opportunities outlined in Alternative 3 with the elimination of designated campsites in Kantishna. Designated campsites could be created when and if resource impacts show a demonstrated need. |

Response to Comments

Comments



AIRCRAFT OWNERS AND PILOTS ASSOCIATION

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July 13, 2005

Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

RE: Denali National Park and Preserve Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan

Dear Mr. Anderson:

The Aircraft Owners and Pilot's Association (AOPA), on behalf of over 405,000 general aviation pilots, including over 4,500 pilots in Alaska, supports continued general aviation access throughout Denali National Park and Preserve with a Back Country Management Plan that ensures future general aviation access consistent with existing regulations as highlighted in Alternative Five of the revised draft plan. AOPA contends that Alternative Five would provide the least impact on general aviation operations while preserving the natural sound resource throughout the park. However, AOPA is concerned with the Natural Sound Disturbance standards that have been established based solely on human observations and a few automated sound stations.

Access:

At over six million acres in size, aviation provides an essential means for the public to experience Denali, as well as ensuring the opportunity to access remote locations of the park. And while Denali National Park is nearly the size of the state of Maryland, it is served by a single 88-mile gravel road. Access by air is a critical component for visitors and the Park Service staff alike. We appreciate that the National Park Service (NPS) plans to continue to allow non-commercial general aviation landings in the Old Park. AOPA supports continued access for general aviation in all portions of the Old Park, park additions and preserve, to provide access to the backcountry.

Overflights:

AOPA supports and commends the NPS on its action to establish an overflights working group as proposed in all action alternatives. AOPA opposes limitations on general aviation aircraft overflights and re-affirms our willingness to participate in the overflights working group with a goal of developing voluntary guidelines to protect park resources, while preserving airspace access.

Response to Comments

Comments

Mr. Paul Anderson
Page 2
July 13, 2005

Soundscape:

AOPA is concerned with the proposed soundscape standards as a basis to limit access to either airspace or landing areas in Denali National Park. There is insufficient base line data available to evaluate the impact of the standards proposed in the plan. The limited data that has been collected indicates that Stampede, a relatively “quiet” region of the park, exceeds the proposed standards at least part of the time. At this time we are unable to establish whether this is the result of an overly restrictive sound standard, or placement of the sound monitoring equipment with respect to the airstrip.

While AOPA is sensitive to noise considerations, we need to see a scientifically valid plan for soundscape monitoring, and baseline data acquired over a full range of seasons to establish if the proposed standards are realistic. Though NPS proposes to revisit the standards after more baseline data has been collected, we believe it is premature to adopt them for use in operational management of the park.

Visitor Education:

Even while NPS works to establish soundscape standards for Denali National Park, it is important to manage visitor expectations concerning the role of aircraft as part of the nation’s transportation system, and their role in management of the park itself.

Sources of air traffic include commercial jets at cruise altitude, and smaller general aviation aircraft traveling between Alaskan communities whose flight path just happens to over fly the park.

The limited road access in an area over six million acres in size requires the NPS itself to use aircraft and helicopters for law enforcement activities, game surveys, search and rescue and other management activities. While the NPS plans to evaluate its own administrative use of aircraft, it is difficult to see a scenario that reduces the reliance on aviation significantly. Yet the low-altitude nature of these operations are often what cause visitor complaints.

AOPA believes it is imperative to educate users as to the role aviation plays in the transportation system that supports Denali and allows the NPS to maintain the park with the lack of surface transportation that would otherwise be developed. A strong aviation education program combined with efforts to reduce motorized noise where possible should serve as a winning combination to continue to enjoy high quality visitor experience, and provide resource protection consistent with the goals of the park. The overflights working group should be used as a resource in assisting the development of visitor education on the important role aviation plays at Denali.

1

2

Response to Comments

AOPA-1

The National Park Service agrees that data from the Stampede area, as well as elsewhere in the park, are limited, and leads to the types of questions raised. Nonetheless, the agency is appropriately establishing provisional indicators and standards for natural sound disturbance. The application of indicators and standards through the Visitor Experience-Resource Protection (VERP) process is the recommended methodology for NPS managers to meet statutory requirements for addressing carrying capacity in GMP documents. The NPS VERP Handbook (NPS 1997b) provides guidance to managers on the entire process. The handbook specifically recommends establishing provisional indicators and standards in instances where additional information is needed to assure validity and monitoring feasibility. The National Park Service acknowledges that more information is needed to fully inform the discussion of standards for natural sound in the backcountry, but believes enough information exists to establish provisional indicators and standards while additional data are collected.

AOPA-2

The BCMP proposes a wilderness education program for all park visitors, and a discussion of the role of aviation in providing access to wilderness in Alaska could be a part of that program. The National Park Service highlights in its educational programs the importance of scientific research at Denali, which also brings to the fore the role of aviation in supporting research activities. However, the 2000 survey of overnight backpackers at Denali (Swanson et al. 2002) found that backpackers who arrived at the park with no knowledge of aircraft activity were more likely to report that overflights annoyed them and detracted from their experiences when informed about aircraft activity prior to their trip than when the presence of aircraft was not mentioned. It cannot be assumed that better information will mitigate impacts on experiences.

Comments

Mr. Paul Anderson
Page 3
July 13, 2005

Public Safety:

Given the lack of surface access in Denali, the NPS is encouraged to enhance existing and historical landing areas for visitor access and for use by park service personnel in management of the park. AOPA supports the concept of portals introduced in the plan, but would like to see them extend beyond the glacier landing areas to provide access in remote portions of the park, particularly in the west and north units far from the park road. It would be beneficial to chart these landing areas so that backcountry visitors may know their locations as possible points to enter or exit the backcountry, and in case of emergency or changes of plan which may require rescue and evacuation.

3

We note the Wrangell St. Elias National Park has made constructive use of backcountry airstrips and public use cabins that support low-impact use of the backcountry and promote public safety. In that park, a partnership has been developed with an aviation organization that donates labor to support the upkeep of the airstrips, helping keep park maintenance costs at a minimum. AOPA would support such a partnership in Denali.

AOPA appreciates the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations on the revised draft plan and encourage the NPS to take all appropriate measures to ensure general aviation access is maintained throughout Denali National Park and Preserve.

Sincerely,



Heidi J. Williams
Director
Air Traffic Services

Response to Comments

AOPA-3

Portal management areas were designed to be areas that have a substantially higher level of use than surrounding areas. Although there are many airplane landing areas in parts of the backcountry that are not designated as Portals, the BCMP prescriptions do not intend for those areas to develop into extremely busy landing locations as is true for the Portals on the glaciers. At present, use at these other landing areas is believed to be very low and even significant increases in use would not lead to a violation of management area standards in those areas. The National Park Service is presently inventorying landing areas and could consider charting them in the future.

Comments

July 15, 2005

Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

RE: Denali National Park and Preserve Backcountry Management Plan

Dear Mr. Anderson:

The Alaska Airmen's Association, representing over 2,000 general aviation members in Alaska, applauds the efforts of the Park Service staff to produce an inclusive and comprehensive plan for Denali Back Country, and supports it with minor suggestions.

Access for general aviation is our most important issue. The backcountry in Denali has essentially no road access, and very few trails which provide surface access. Consequently, aviation is vital to be able to access the park. Not only do our members use aircraft to access remote regions of Denali, but the National Park Service uses aviation for a variety of management activities, ranging from search and rescue to wildlife studies. Based on our concerns regarding access, we support Alternative 5.

We support the adaptive management concept outlined in the plan, which employs a graduated series of management tools to protect park resources. However, we are concerned that the soundscape standards presented in the plan may set standards not based on good scientific data and may be too restrictive. We feel that a better sound monitoring program must be developed and several years of data collected before these standards are adopted.

Santa Monica Airport, with several sound monitors and many years of measuring has set a standard 80dBA and aircraft as small as some Cessna Citations are excluded. 40dBA for the majority of Denali Park does not appear to be scientifically appropriate. We are willing to participate in flyover testing to assess dBA at various altitudes with different aircraft.

The Airmen's Association supports an overflights working group, as a means to define voluntary measures to address issues concerning the park. Our association is willing to participate in this forum.

Response to Comments

AAA-1

See AOPA-1.

AAA-2

Santa Monica airport is located in one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States, and the standards appropriate there may not be appropriate at Denali. A standard of 40 dBA was proposed for parts of the Denali backcountry based on its wilderness resources, suggested guidance in draft documents from the NPS Natural Sounds Program, and data from Denali that suggest the standard is achievable in many locations.

1

2

Comments

We believe the studies cited in the plan concerning the impact of aircraft noise on park visitors suggest that NPS needs to do a better job managing the visitor expectations. In order to manage a park of this size, in an almost completely roadless fashion, the use of aircraft and helicopters is essential. Consequently, park visitors need to be educated concerning the uses of aircraft they may see while traveling in the park. Explaining the role of aviation with regard to the lack of surface access is very important to visitors understanding this relationship, as the aircraft often generating complaints are those operating at low-level on park service missions.

3

Finally, the Airmen's Association would like to see the concept of portals expanded from the glacier areas to other remote areas in the park. Airstrips should be charted and maintained at appropriate levels to provide access for backcountry hikers and other visitors. We also would like to see public use cabins provided in association with backcountry airstrips both for recreational use and as a matter of public safety given the harsh climate and lack of infrastructure

4

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this plan. We look forward to continue working with NPS as the plan is developed.

Sincerely,

Felix M. Maguire, Director
Chair Legislative Committee
Alaska Airmen's Association

Response to Comments

AAA-3

See AOPA-2.

AAA-4

See AOPA-3 regarding airstrips and SoA-25 concerning public use cabins.



Comments

Alaska Outdoor Council

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July 13, 2005

Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali NP and Preserve
PO Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755

RE: Comments on the Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan

General Comments

The Alaska Outdoor Council (AOC) represents over 10,000 Alaskans who fish, hunt, trap and recreate on public lands and waters in Alaska. AOC participated in the public process which resulted in the passage of Public Law 96-487, the Alaska National Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA).

One of the purposes of ANILCA is to "... preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities including but not limited to hiking, canoeing, fishing and sport hunting ..." (Title I, Sec.101 (b)).

ANILCA added vast acreages to Mt. McKinley National Park and re-designated the entire unit as Denali National Park and Preserve. The stated management purposes of the park additions and preserve lands include: "... to provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities" (Title II, Sec.202 (3)(a)). The same Section also specifies that subsistence uses by local rural residents shall be permitted in the additions to the park where such uses are traditional.

Many AOC members and other Alaskans vividly remember the intense political struggles to have included in the purposes of Denali National Park and Preserve accommodation of the activities cited above, which are so integral to Alaskan traditions, lifestyles, and values.

The AOC objects to and opposes the diminishment in the Revised Draft Back Country Management Plan of the opportunities specifically provided for in ANILCA. These opportunities are threatened by the NPS's reliance on orders of questionable relevance, such as those relating to "soundscape preservation", "wilderness management", and in the backcountry Draft, the "commercial services plan". Ignoring the legislative distinctions among pre-existing park lands, park additions, and preserve lands and their

Response to Comments

Comments

stated management purposes threatens the hard-won accommodation of traditional Alaskan resource uses.

Painting all “back country” with minor variations of the same pristine preservation purposes brush betrays the formal recognition of the diverse values Congress finally provided. Congressional recognition must be respected and supported by the National Park Service.

Wilderness Designations and Management:

The AOC opposes the application of indicators or standards that would apply The Wilderness Act of 1964 prohibition of recreational activities on lands not designated Wilderness by Congress. Denali Park additions and Preserve are not managed under the Wilderness Act regulations. Restrictions on “traditional activities” proposed on additions to the pre-ANILCA Mt. McKinley NP in Alternatives 2 thru 5 are arbitrary and capricious actions.

Under the heading Need For Plan (page 5, Denali Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan, 2005) the NPS writes “Visitation has grown dramatically for some backcountry activities-use is much more dense, creating concerns about damage to resource and generating conflicts among different user groups. For many locations and activities, the NPS has little information about the extent and character of use.” The Denali Revised Backcountry Management Plan (BMP) fails to provide the data necessary to substantiate their claims of resource damage or user conflicts on lands added to Denali National Park and Preserve. The numbers of backcountry overnight stays in Denali NP and P have oscillated between 26,029 in 1985 to 34,016 in 2004. (Page 164, table 3-9) The Denali BMP fails to state how many of these backcountry overnight stays occurred on 3.73 million acres of park addition and preserve lands, not designated as Wilderness.

Traditional Activities:

The Minimally Acceptable Resource and Social Conditions (page 39-49) proposed for lands added to the preexisting park, by ANILCA Section 202(3)(a), are far more restrictive than Congress ever intended. Adherence to qualitative and quantitative standards for Natural Sound Disturbance (Table 2-5) for Denali Park additions and Preserve would virtually eliminate motorized access for “traditional activities” such as subsistence and sport hunting and fishing, as well as recreational snowmobiling and boating. These “traditional activities” are clearly protected by law under Section 1110 of ANILCA.

Access:

The NPS has made their intentions clear regarding recreational motorized uses on Denali park additions and preserve lands, “If in the future the term “traditional activities” were defined to exclude recreational use, such recreational use would be prohibited by existing NPS regulation.” (Page 397) Natural sound disturbance

Response to Comments

AOC-1

The Wilderness Act does not “prohibit recreational activities” and the application of indicators and standards in the BCMP does not prohibit recreational opportunities. Indicators and standards provide guidance for acceptable levels of impact from visitor activities, and are the recommended tool for the National Park Service to address carrying capacity as provided for in the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978. Indicators and standards do not by themselves restrict recreational activities either, although the National Park Service could take action in the future to manage activities in order to assure standards are met. While the park additions and preserve are not designated wilderness under the Wilderness Act, ANILCA does state that purposes for the park include “preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities” and “provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational opportunities.” The indicators and standards chosen for park additions and preserve are consistent with those statutory purposes. None of the alternatives in the plan propose specific restrictions on “traditional activities” in the park additions and preserve, although Alternatives 2 and 3 would define the term similar to the way it is defined for the Old Park.

AOC-2

See AT-1 and ISMA-1. While overnight use has fluctuated over time, it has been slowly trending upward. Chapter 3 of the *Revised Draft EIS* provides numbers that are available, including those for mountaineering registration on Mt. McKinley, voluntary registrations from other mountaineering destinations, and overnight backcountry use primarily in the Old Park. Day use by airplane, snowmachine, and foot are among the most rapidly increasing forms of visitation at Denali, but only data from commercial airplane landings is available. The landings data show tremendous increases in visitation and are provided in the Visitor Use section of chapter 3. The National Park Service is responsible for managing visitor use to protect park resources in the park additions as well as the Denali Wilderness.

Comments

descriptors of sound for Denali park additions and preserve is nothing more than a veiled attempt to circumvent existing laws allowing traditional activities.

Commercial Services:

Sport hunting is one of the wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities included in ANILCA Section 101. (Page 8) All Denali Preserve lands are open to non-subsistence hunters, when local resident subsistence harvest needs are being met.

Guided Sport Hunting concessions should be made available in the entire Denali Preserve.

4

Conclusion:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Denali Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan. The AOC believes management of backcountry recreational opportunities and the preservation of resource values in Denali National Park and Preserve can be achieved without unnecessarily restricting traditional activities. Alternatives 2 thru 5 are over restrictive regarding traditional activities on Denali Park additions and Preserve. AOC supports Alternative 1 as the only viable option for legally adhering to the congressional mandate of ANILCA; Section 101, Section 202(3)(a), Section 1301(b)(4), Section 1317(c), Section 1314, and Section 1110(a).

The AOC supports Alternative 1, until such time as the NPS revises their Denali Backcountry Management Plan to separate regulations pertaining to the pre-ANILCA portion of the Park, congressionally designated Wilderness, from park additions and the preserve created by ANILCA. A revised Denali Backcountry Management Plan should contain the necessary data to substantiate alleged recreational user conflicts and resource damage in Denali National Park additions and Preserve areas separate from the old Mt. McKinley NP.

Sincerely,

Rod Arno, Executive Director of the Alaska Outdoor Council

Cc. U.S. Senator Ted Stevens
U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Representative Don Young
Alaska Governor Frank Murkowski

Response to Comments

AOC-3

The sound standards specifically allow for a level of motorized access for traditional activities based on data presented in the natural sound sections of chapters 3 and 4. However, the total amount of motorized noise is still limited to protect natural soundscapes and other resources and values. ANILCA 1110(a) subjects access for traditional activities to “reasonable regulations by the Secretary to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units.” The National Park Service is committed to providing legal access with accompanying reasonable regulation.

AOC-4

See APHA-1.

Comments

LAW OFFICES

BIRCH, HORTON, BITTNER AND CHEROT

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July 1, 2005



Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Dear Mr. Anderson:

The following comments on the Revised Draft Denali Backcountry Plan are submitted on behalf of the Alaska Professional Hunters Association (APHA).

Hunting Opportunities

APHA strongly supports opening the entire southwestern Preserve area to guided hunting and dividing the area into two guide units. This will effectively re-open an area closed for many years, assure two economically viable guide units, and expand recreation opportunities within the Preserve.

Additionally, we support those elements of Alternative 5 that would create new guided opportunities in the northern Preserve unit proximate to Lake Minchumina. We do not perceive any conflicts with subsistence users in the area. The text of the Plan notes that Lake Minchumina is primarily a non-Native community and that most subsistence taking in Denali is associated with Cantwell (see pages 143-146, 153). Similarly, the population of Telida is declining and makes very limited demands on the wildlife resources of the Preserve. These facts provide support for expanding guided hunting opportunities in the northern Preserve area.

Access

We continue to oppose efforts to regulate ANILCA-guaranteed access on the basis of "social conditions", the "experiential values" of Wilderness backpackers, or the aesthetic sensibilities of some backcountry users. This is inconsistent with the law and greatly facilitates the ability of NPS, and other federal agencies, to impose restrictions and closures on airplane and motorboat access. Nothing in the law gives this subset of users (i.e., backpacking wilderness enthusiasts) special status that allows their subjective perceptions to become the basis for restricting other less sensitive users of the public lands (see pages 168-169). Motorized access

Response to Comments

APHA-1

Unlike the southwest preserve, the northwest preserve has active subsistence users who are dependent upon the resources of the area and who feel that additional pressure on resources from guided sport hunting would be detrimental to their use. The National Park Service is choosing to be cautious in authorizing new guide areas in the northwest preserve until persuaded that the resources can withstand the additional use and that the commercial service would be necessary and appropriate.

APHA-2

See ISMA-2. Under the modified preferred alternative, the National Park Service would address airplane and motorboat access using the Access Management Tools in Table 2-11. These tools are employed whenever management area standards are approached or exceeded. Standards are defined to protect Denali's resources and values, which are identified in the purposes of the park identified in ANILCA. These purposes include "preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities" and provide opportunities and reasonable access for "wilderness recreational activities." Consideration of intangible resource values is essential for realizing the statutory purposes of the park and preserve. Restrictions and closures may not be necessary for achieving the standards identified in the plan, and the modified preferred alternative commits the National Park Service to using the "least restrictive mechanism or 'tool' to accomplish the goals of the plan.

Comments

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restrictions and closures must be based on demonstrable and detrimental impacts to physical, tangible resources. And then, the closures should be the smallest practicable in time and space to address the impacts.

To that end, we support the hierarchy of tools identified in the plan (page 50-51). Using actual closures as the tool of last resort is fully consistent with ANILCA. We note that section 1110(a) grew out of express promises made to APHA by then Alaska Lands Subcommittee Chairman Rep. John Seiberling that Congress would make special provisions to assure access via airplanes, motorboats, and snowmachines notwithstanding the traditional restrictions associated with Park or Wilderness status.¹ It is critical that the letter and spirit of the access guarantee enshrined in ANILCA be honored completely. At this point, the Plan – excepting the tools approach – fails to do that.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Plan.

Sincerely,

BIRCH, HORTON, BITTNER
AND CHEROT



Gretchen L. Gaston

cc: Drue Pearce
Cam Toohey
The Honorable Ted Stevens
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
The Honorable Don Young

¹ Hearings before the Subcommittee on General Oversight and Alaska Lands, No. 95-16, Part XII, August 20, 1977, page 179.

Response to Comments

Comments

Paul Anderson, Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Dear Mr. Anderson:

The purpose of this letter from the Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition (AQRC) is to submit comments on the Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan for Denali National Park and Preserve (Plan).

The Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition is a statewide, nonprofit organization which, like the National Park Service, regards the natural soundscape as a natural resource to be protected, like other resources, by the managers of public lands. Our advocacy for natural quiet in the backcountry is not just to eliminate sounds of motors, but to create opportunity for the quiet recreationist to experience the intangible values, such as peace, solitude and self sufficiency, that a natural soundscape affords. On lands managed by agencies with a multiuse mandate, AQRC calls for a fair balance of recreational opportunities for the motorized and nonmotorized recreationist, both summer and winter. We advocate for both road-accessible and backcountry opportunities for the quiet recreationist. AQRC is also concerned with the rights of cabin owners to have peace and quiet and for wildlife to be free from the noise of recreational machines in the backcountry.

AQRC applauds the efforts made in this Plan to articulate, in a straightforward manner, the unique wilderness and resource values of this Park and NPS's legal obligations under the Organic and Wilderness Acts and ANILCA to honor, protect and preserve such values. These values are both tangible, such as natural sounds, and intangible, such as wilderness values like solitude. The governing laws set a very high management standard: to manage parks so that the scenery, natural and historic objects and wildlife are left unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations (Organic Act); or if Wilderness, the Act speaks of land which has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. The specific mandate of Section 203(a) of ANILCA requires management "to provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for wilderness recreational activities ". (For the record, we note that though state government apparently fails to believe that NPS has the authority or obligation to protect intangible values, the Constitution of the State of Alaska recognizes that intangible values do in fact exist and are to be preserved and protected, as established by Section VIII which authorizes the legislature to acquire "areas of natural beauty".) AQRC also appreciates the emphasis this Plan places on the discussion and analysis of the natural soundscape as one of the Park resources to be protected.

We fully support a number of the premises and constraints adopted in the Plan. For example, we believe that this Plan successfully makes the case that the land contained in the Park and Preserve, for historical

Response to Comments

Comments

and legal reasons, is different from, and is to be managed differently than, the surrounding public lands where such values are not necessarily protected. We further note that about 3.7 million acres of the park additions and preserve have been deemed suitable, and of that amount, 2.25 million acres have been proposed to be recommended, for formal wilderness designation. Under NPS policy such lands are required to be managed in a manner which will not diminish their wilderness character or jeopardize their eligibility for formal designation. AQRC also finds very useful for our analysis, the framework for examining recreational opportunities in a wilderness park, set forth at pages 384-5, which categorizes recreational activities based on the degree to which the activities are "wilderness dependent". The Plan concludes that under this framework "Recreational activities that depend on wilderness conditions, such as experiencing solitude and isolation, observing natural ecological processes, or challenging oneself with wilderness travel" are most consistent with Denali's statutory guidance. It further concludes that snowmachine racing and highmarking fall into a different category, which is for activities which occur outdoors but do not need wilderness conditions.

The issue to be discussed in these comments is whether AQRC, after review of the Plan, finds that, the Preferred, or any other, alternative, provides a management framework which in the future will restore and maintain Denali National Park and Preserve as a wilderness park. AQRC does not believe that the Preferred Alternative provides management which satisfies both the legal and policy requirements of a wilderness park. In our opinion, the Preferred Alternative inappropriately attempts to accommodate activities which compromise the very wilderness values for which the Park was created and is required to be managed. For example, 11% of the lands are to be classified as Management Area A whose purpose is to "provide a diversity of opportunities for wilderness recreational activities that are relatively accessible to day users and to those who have limited wilderness travel skills or equipment". Is this the type of activity envisioned when Section 203(a) of ANILCA added the four million acres or appropriate in possible Wilderness or is this the type of activity which should be limited to the Frontcountry areas? In Management Area A, natural sounds can be "frequently disturbed" by motorized noise up to 25% of any hour and there may be up to 25 motorized noise intrusions per day that exceed natural ambient sound. The Preferred Alternative would permit snowmachining for "traditional activities", but the failure to define the term means snowmachining could occur anyplace at any time throughout the 4 million acres in the park additions and preserve. Indeed, 64% of the park additions and preserve would be open to snowmachining (p. 274). which since the Old Park is closed, means that 64% of the park additions and preserve would be open to snowmachining. Moreover, in the event that Congress designated additional wilderness, the Preferred states that NPS would seek an exception (to the prohibition of any motors in Wilderness) to continue to permit recreational snowmachining in the designated Corridors.

AQRC supports the People for Parks Alternative which we believe provides the most protection of the wilderness and resource values of the Park.

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We strongly support extending the existing definition for traditional activities currently in use for the Old Park to the 1980 Park Additions and Preserve. Section 1110(a) of ANILCA requires no more than to allow snowmachining for "traditional activities" and that activity is then further subject to reasonable regulations. As set forth in the analytic framework to determine wilderness dependent recreational activities, recreational snowmachining does not fall into the third category which the Plan indicates are the type of activities most consistent with Denali's statutory guidance. We contend that recreational snowmachining is, in fact, in conflict with wilderness values. The purpose of the "snowmachine corridors" set forth in alternatives 3, 4 and 5, is not to control or necessarily channel snowmachine traffic, but to inform snowmachiners and others using the corridors, or adjacent lands, of what to expect in terms of possible noise and presence of other parties. We see no way to preserve the wilderness values and resources of the Park, particularly its natural soundscape, except to prohibit recreational snowmachining in all areas of the Park. That traffic can be accommodated on the surrounding public lands which were not established with the same requirements to preserve wilderness values.

We strongly support the formation of an "Aircraft Overflights Working Group" and strongly recommend that group include representation of people, such as cabin owners, who are directly impacted by the noise of air tourism, though located outside of the Park boundaries. It has never been apparent to AQRC why those who built a cabin in the backcountry for the very purpose of experiencing living in the backcountry, have to sacrifice their experience for that of the momentary experience, which is all facilitated by a public agency, of the flightseeing tourist. It well may be that voluntary measures will not work to preserve the Park values adversely affected by relentless overflights and in that case we recommend NPS seek legislation which would permit some limitations of overflights in order to protect the unique wilderness values of Denali. In turn, any limitations would help restore the opportunities for experiencing natural sounds by cabin owners now directly impacted by overhead flightseeing routes.

Whichever alternative is adopted, AQRC is very concerned about the ability of NPS to actually manage this Plan. A Plan based on desired future conditions requires clear, quantifiable standards and conditions, a monitoring plan with specific timelines and an extensive monitoring and enforcement capability. Unless this can be guaranteed, this Plan should not be approved. The Final needs to address this concern explicitly and what NPS will do in the absence of adequate additional funding and staffing. There is no way to tell from the budget on page 520 whether the figures are adequate to support the additional monitoring staff and resources required since a cost analysis is not set forth. As a small, but essential, step, we suggest that the language in whatever alternative is selected be strengthened wherever possible by changing "shall" from "may" or "could", etc., in order to both inform the public as well as NPS staff as to the standard. We recommend, and strongly urge, that NPS set up a citizen's monitoring advisory committee to help develop a specific annual monitoring plan and priorities, provide oversight to the monitoring efforts and results and help gain

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AQRC-1

See NPCA-9 and NPCA-10.

Comments

public support for NPS's management efforts in Denali.

AQRC appreciates the emphasis this Plan places on the value of natural sound as an inherent natural resource of a national park—"they (natural sounds) are inherent components of the "scenery and the natural and historic objects and wild life" protected by the Organic Act". The Plan further points out that due to the wilderness character of the Denali backcountry areas, human generated sounds which intrude on the natural soundscape, such as planes or snowmachines, are to be characterized as noise under NPS policy. We believe, however, that the standard set for "minimally acceptable resource conditions" for natural sound disturbance permits too much disturbance, reaches the level of impairment and fails to meet NPS's soundscape policy. For example, in Management Area A, the desired future condition is the standard of "High" which permits motorized noises to be audible up to 25% of any hour and up to 25 motorized noise intrusions (over natural ambient sounds) per day. The Plan does not consider this level of noise to be excessive; we disagree. We do not believe this amount of noise should be allowed in a wilderness park and recommend a standard of lower impacts throughout most of the management areas. While the Plan makes clear that most of the noise is caused by planes and thus out of NPS's jurisdiction to manage, NPS does have the option of prohibiting recreational snowmachining and limiting flightseeing landing (as advocated in the People's Alternative) in order to protect and restore the natural soundscape to the backcountry of this wilderness park. AQRC further takes issue with the Plan's conclusion on page 282 that "Natural sound disturbances do not represent permanent changes in park resources; however if plan actions allow indefinitely recurring seasonal disturbances the affects would be considered long term". This statement appears to address the sounds of a natural soundscape that are momentarily "masked" by the sounds of a machine, such as a plane, but why could not that noisy interval qualify as a permanent change? At what point does a long term impact become permanent? Does permanent mean forever or simply lasting beyond the life of the plan? Must an impact be permanent before it is considered to be an impairment? Is it not an impairment of the natural soundscape if for most of the life of the plan the natural sounds in X place no longer include certain animal or bird sounds due to displacement by recreational motors? The conclusion appears to say that if the soundscape at some point during the life of the plan can be restored, there can be no impairment. Under that "moving" standard, you could permit unlimited motorized recreational traffic in the Park additions and Preserve for years without finding impairment of the resource or having to take action since in the last year of the plan, you could prohibit snowmachining and restore the natural soundscape. We believe the Plan needs clearer standards throughout.

In summary, Denali National Park and Preserve is a backcountry wilderness park, mandated to be managed differently from surrounding state and federal public lands and obligated by law and NPS policy to protect the Park's tangible natural resources as well as its intangible values. To manage this park NPS must adopt strict and clear standards

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AQRC-2

See NPCA-16.

AQRC-3

The referenced text on p.282 in the *Revised Draft EIS* refers to definitions presented on p.212-214, which includes a definition for impairment. "Impairment" occurs whenever "a resource would no longer fulfill the specific purposes identified in the park's establishing legislation or its role in maintaining the natural integrity of the park." Both conditions are potentially true for the natural sound resource, and the National Park Service concluded that Alternative 1, the no-action alternative, would result in impairment of this resource. The conclusions regarding impacts to natural sounds in both the *Revised Draft EIS* and the *Final EIS* in no way assert that because natural sound could be restored at any time, then impairment could not occur. In fact, the analysis assumes that in locations where there is high demand for motorized access, noise levels would increase to the limits defined by standards. However, the NPS believes that this amount of noise would not impair the natural sound resource under the modified preferred alternative, although major adverse impacts would occur.

Comments

and indicators to accurately measure the impact of activities on the resources to be protect and then have the capacity and commitment to monitor the standards in such a way that NPS can and will have the political will to, through adaptive management, change direction in order to protect impacted Park resources. As written, however, this Plan erodes the very values it purports to protect by attempting to accommodate activities, such as recreational snowmachining, which have no place in a wilderness park.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely yours,

Trisha Herminghaus, President

Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition

PO Box 202582

Anchorage, AK 99520

Response to Comments

Comments



THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB

LLOYD F. ATHEARN
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

July 15, 2005

Paul R. Anderson, Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
PO Box 9
Denali Park AK 99755

Dear Superintendent Anderson:

On behalf of The American Alpine Club, I would like to respond formally to the revised draft Backcountry Management Plan for Denali National Park and Preserve that was released in late April. The BMP will have a tremendous impact on AAC members and other climbers worldwide who desire to climb the highest peak in North America, as well as the other significant peaks in the park. The AAC has shared its thoughts and suggestions during the scoping phase, at a January 2002 mountaineering workshop in Anchorage, and during the June 2003 comment phase on the original draft BMP. The AAC is encouraged to see the refinement of many concepts contained in the revised draft BMP, but also is concerned that significant flaws exist in the document we hope can be resolved before the final plan is adopted.

IMPACT ON AAC MEMBERS

The American Alpine Club, founded in 1902, is the premiere national organization representing the interests and concerns of American mountaineers and rock climbers. Since our inception we have worked to promote climbing knowledge, conserve mountain environments and serve the American climbing community. Beyond our work domestically, the AAC is the official representative of American climbers in the UIAA (Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme), the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation, an international representative body for climbers worldwide.

The AAC's current membership numbers about 7,000 individuals throughout the US and abroad, including more than 160 in Alaska. We also represent more than 40 climbing-related businesses that have joined our corporate membership program. Our members are frequent visitors to wilderness areas and National Parks, with members climbing an average of 74 days per year according to a membership survey conducted in 2000. That study showed that 33% of our members who live outside of the state have climbed in Alaska, while another 32% plan to do so within the next couple of years. (Denali National Park and Preserve likely was the primary destination due to its international reputation among climbers and great wealth of climbing objectives.)

MANAGEMENT GOALS

The AAC concurs with the general vision articulated on pages 10-11, which focuses on preserving the natural and cultural resources contained in the Old Park, park additions and preserve areas, as well as managing recreational opportunities that are "compatible with the unique resources and values for which the park was established." However, after thoroughly reviewing the document, we question whether the revised Backcountry Management Plan's preferred alternative will allow that vision to be realized, since it authorizes activities that are neither related to, nor compatible with the resources and values for which the park was established. Further, it appears that the revised BMP spends more effort accommodating popular, but questionably appropriate recreational activities than it does rectifying degradation to intended activities and preventing further resource degradation. The environmental analysis itself acknowledges that the

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preferred alternative will provide “little overall mitigation for past actions” and will still allow “cumulative major adverse impacts” to wilderness resources and natural soundscapes.”

For example, snowmachines and aircraft are clearly authorized under ANILCA to provide access for “traditional” and “subsistence” activities, as well as those purposes specifically mentioned in ANILCA like mountaineering and other “wilderness recreational activities.” It is unclear, however, whether either activity is allowed for purely recreational purposes. (The draft BMP alludes to this in the response to State of Alaska comments near the top of page 440 when it cites that the Senate Report “guarantees access subject to reasonable regulations by the Secretary...for traditional or customary activities, such as subsistence and sport hunting, fishing, berry picking, and travel between villages,” but asks the State to provide examples from the legislative history showing that Congress intended “traditional activities” to include sightseeing, wildlife viewing and picnicking.) The BMP must, but currently does not, distinguish between the *method* of access and the *purpose* necessitating the access. We do not believe they are one and the same. This is an important distinction because both activities have grown significantly in recent years, and both contribute to significantly degraded wilderness character of the park additions for the intended purpose of mountaineering and climbing. The preferred alternative neither rectifies past damage to natural soundscapes experienced by climbers, nor provides sufficient protection against further degradation. Thus, it is hard to see how the preferred alternative will achieve the general vision articulated in this section.

Beyond this overall concern about whether the preferred alternative will achieve the ambitious and appropriate general vision, the AAC is concerned very specifically that the “Objectives” listed on page 11 are incomplete because they do not properly acknowledge the need to protect and preserve the primitive, wilderness-dependent recreational opportunities established in the Wilderness Act and the specific purposes outlined in ANILCA for the park additions and preserves. The second bullet in this section should note the need to protect “opportunities for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation,” which comes directly from the Wilderness Act’s definition of wilderness. The BMP cannot claim that opportunities for wilderness “solitude” must be protected without simultaneously protecting opportunities for “primitive recreation” since both are found in the same sentence of the Wilderness Act. Further, ANILCA Section 202(3)(a) specifically lists as one of three principal management purposes for the park additions and reserve: “to provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering and other wilderness recreational activities.” It is not appropriate to excerpt two components from the Wilderness Act and ANILCA—“wilderness character” and “opportunities for solitude”—without acknowledging that both documents also establish a third component: wilderness-dependent recreational activities, specifically climbing and mountaineering.

On a related point, the paragraph on the top of page 385 describing the methodology for determining appropriate recreational opportunities is not complete. The paragraph provides a clear description of the multi-tiered approach to determining which activities are dependent upon and appropriate for conditions established in the park’s authorizing legislation. While examples are given for activities that do not depend upon and actually degrade wilderness conditions (snowmachine racing and high-marking) and activities that, while not wilderness dependent are enhanced by wilderness (scenic air tours), the paragraph provides no examples of the highest tier of wilderness dependency—those activities that actually depend upon wilderness conditions. The obvious example that should be included, but was not, is mountaineering on the natural features found only in the wilderness portions of the park. These features, including the high point in North America, simply cannot be replicated any place else in the world.

MANAGEMENT AREA DESCRIPTIONS

The AAC is pleased with the way planners have developed new management area designations for the revised draft BMP. We are particularly encouraged by development of management area “C” that provides for the unique needs and experiences of climbing and mountaineering expeditions in the southern park additions. One must recall that these additions to the park were made by ANILCA with a specific three-fold intent, one of which was to “provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering and other wilderness recreational activities.” The initial draft BMP did not adequately reflect the unique status climbing was given by ANILCA in these areas, and establishment of a

Response to Comments

AAC-1

The National Park Service agrees that the *Revised Draft EIS* does not always specifically distinguish between the “method” and “purpose” of access. Usually it is very difficult to separate the two. For example, if a person is hiking in the Denali backcountry, is hiking the “purpose” in and of itself, or is it the means of transportation for wildlife and scenic viewing, wilderness experience, or ecological learning? Valid purposes for accessing the park and preserve are those specified in legislation for the national park and the National Park Service. Valid means of access are those that are consistent with resource protection and statutory and regulatory guidance. The modified preferred alternative for the most part relies on existing statutory and regulatory guidance for modes of access, which is outlined in chapter 1, without recommending specific new constraints. However, the modified preferred alternative also sets thresholds that define visitor experience goals and resource conditions the National Park Service seeks to protect in accordance with statutory purposes. If valid means of access do not threaten to exceed these thresholds, further action to manage the means of access would not be necessary.

AAC-2

The National Park Service agrees that providing wilderness recreational opportunities, including reasonable access, should be a stated objective of the plan and has amended the text of chapter 1 accordingly.

AAC-3

The National Park Service agrees with this criticism and has amended the page in question to provide some examples of wilderness-dependent activities.

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management zone dedicated to these experiences helps identify how adequately the Park Service is protecting these intended activities from degradation in each of the action alternatives.

The “C” zone descriptions generally provide good minimal acceptable resource and social conditions one would expect to find in these remote areas. Wilderness climbing like that found in Denali National Park is an activity that relies on intact natural environments. In contrast to many other park visitors, climbers do not expect that nature should be modified significantly to provide for comfort or convenience. Any modifications made by climbers (e.g. fixed anchor placements, construction of snow walls around tents, etc.) are minimal in scope, necessary for visitor safety and generally are not permanent. However, climbing has unique social factors that must be respected. For example, natural topography and hazards often necessitate that climbers camp within sight and sound of each other in basecamps or higher camps/bivy areas. Proximity to others is infinitely less significant to climbers than the safety of any camping area. Similarly, due to the wide open spaces above timberline and on rock faces, it is often possible to see and be seen by other climbers without interfering in their climbing experiences.

The seasonal West Buttress Corridor does a good job of setting up appropriate minimal acceptable resource and social conditions for this highly traveled climbing route. This zoning overlay has existed in other prior plans, but was focused largely on the maximum encounter level allowed. We fully support the move away from focusing solely on encounters with other climbers toward an approach that seeks to establish a broader range of natural resource and social conditions appropriate for a climbing route that has seen 87% of all climbing use on Mount McKinley over the last five seasons, and 92% in 2004.

The one issue where we have significant objections with the management area descriptions provided for zones “C” and the West Buttress Corridor involves the minimally acceptable conditions for natural sound disturbance. In both instances we believe the conditions listed are too high for these zones given the activities appropriate for them and the conditions allowed in other adjacent zones. For example, it does not logically follow that disturbance of natural sounds will be higher in zone “C,” which is tailored to people making long-term use of these backcountry areas for primitive, wilderness-dependent recreation, than is allowed in zone “B,” which is geared towards people making day trips or remote, self-reliant overnight trips. Nevertheless, zone “C” allows “high” disruption of natural sounds (up to 25% of each hour and 25 times per day), while zone “B” allows “medium” degradation of natural sounds (up to 15% of any hour and 10 times per day). Logic would dictate that degradation of natural soundscapes would be less in the zone focused on longer term, wilderness-dependent recreational pursuits since an absence of human-generated noise is more integral to the wilderness character of the lands being visited and the activities in which visitors are engaging.

The West Buttress Corridor provides a particularly perplexing example of this natural sounds standard. The principal landing site providing access to the West Buttress Corridor is located outside of the corridor itself in a “Portal-Major Landing Area” zone. This zoning designation allows for “very high” disturbance of natural sounds, which should provide allowance for noise associated with frequent air taxi takeoffs and landings. Once in the corridor itself, however, there are no landing areas and no need to have a high standard to cover aircraft takeoffs and landings—especially since natural features and the conventional takeoff and approach patterns shield the West Buttress Corridor from much of the aircraft noise at the landing site. Nevertheless, the minimally acceptable resource conditions allow for a “high” level of natural sound disturbance. This is curious given that the area over which the corridor designation is laid allows for significantly lower levels of soundscape degradation—in most alternatives the “OP1” zone calls for “low” natural sound disturbance, while the “B” zone in Alternative 5 calls for “medium” natural sound disturbance. It would be almost physically impossible given the configuration of the corridor to fly through the corridor without passing over the adjacent zones that have significantly lower levels of tolerance for disturbing natural sounds.

We have noted in the past that climbers tend to be viewed as an added “attraction” by scenic flight passengers. Recent studies have shown that scenic flight passengers tend to feel sighting climbers adds to the enjoyment of their trips. However, this added benefit for scenic flight passengers comes at the direct

Response to Comments

AAC-4

The preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* and the modified preferred alternative of the *Final EIS* both provide for the same natural sound conditions in Management Areas B and C. Both allow a “medium” level of natural sound disturbance that allows audible motorized noise up to 15% of any hour and a maximum of 10 motorized noise intrusions per day that exceed natural ambient sound.

AAC-5

The National Park Service agrees with this criticism and has amended the natural sound disturbance indicator on the West Buttress route to correspond with that of the surrounding area.

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expense of degraded conditions and experiences for mountaineers on the ground. The National Park Service would not allow scenic flights to degrade natural conditions for wildlife just so passengers could obtain better views of these attractive animals. It is therefore unclear why it is acceptable to degrade the natural conditions enjoyed by human visitors in this particular corridor. The higher levels of natural sound disturbance allowed in the West Buttress Corridor almost seems to invite intentional aircraft overflights of the climbing route since the only activities occurring within the corridor itself that contribute to higher levels of sound disturbance are helicopter flights, which are related principally to exceptional rescue events and infrequent administrative flights over the course of the climbing season.

BACKCOUNTRY REGISTRATION

The AAC is generally supportive of registering backcountry visitors so the Park Service can obtain accurate statistics about visitor use patterns. Accurate statistics should allow for more informed decision making regarding visitor management. The lack of accurate information, however, continues to plague the revised draft BMP despite our noting the flaws in your data in the previous draft BMP. For example, Table 3-11 on page 174 (inaccurately referred to in the narrative on page 173 as Table 3-18) and the accompanying narrative on page 173 purport to show a “rapid increase in visitor use of Alaska Range destinations” other than Mount McKinley. NPS climbing summaries from past decades, while not fully comprehensive either due to their voluntary nature, refute this assertion.

These older summaries prepared by the NPS indicate that climbing use has been highly erratic, not consistently increasing, on virtually all of the peaks listed in Table 3-11. For example, more than 11 times the number of climbers attempted Mount Silverthorne in 1978 (24) and 1988 (25) than the recent eight-year average listed (2). Attempts on Mount Foraker exceeded the recent eight-year average (30) on 3 of 5 years in the first half of the 1980s. While climbing use on peaks other than McKinley has increased over the years, Table 3-11 appears to illustrate how incomplete user data viewed in isolation can provide inaccurate visitor use trends and result in potentially unneeded backcountry regulations.

Alternative 3 and 4 propose generally similar backcountry registration proposals affecting climbers in the southern park additions east of the Kahiltna Glacier during winter and for overnight trips. The difference is that Alternative 3 would immediately require registration affecting all overnight visitors throughout the park and preserve, as well as winter day-use visitors east of the Kahiltna Glacier. The preferred alternative, however, would impose the registration requirement only when user conflicts and/or resource degradation was noted. Alternative 4 also would lessen the scope of lands potentially affected by registration such that registration would apply principally to climbing and mountaineering in the areas east of the Kahiltna, activities that pose little threat to natural resources, wildlife or soundscape degradation. In fact, the principal impact of climbing comes from human waste, an impact that is directly addressed by enhanced pack-out requirements. Glaringly absent from your proposed registration requirements in the preferred alternative is any mention of requiring registration for recreational day-use snowmachine activities. This is a significant flaw because of the tremendous potential for harm to the physical resource, wildlife and natural soundscapes, as well as the potential for user group conflicts posed by largely unregulated snowmachine use in Alternative 4’s zone “A” areas.

Our support for any backcountry registration system is predicated on several factors:

- Backcountry registration will be free.
- There will be no advance registration period like the 60-day requirement for climbing Mounts McKinley and Foraker.
- The park will utilize on-line registration, self-registration, or phone-in registration to the greatest extent possible so that registration is quick and easy for the backcountry visitor.

Climbers are highly dependent on weather and route conditions in determining the viability of a given route or peak attempt. Some routes are not reliably in condition, and climbers wishing to attempt them must be able to respond immediately when conditions are favorable. Advance registration requirements and

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AAC-6

The National Park Service agrees that data are incomplete for mountaineering use in the Alaska Range. Regardless of what happened in earlier time periods, the noticeable rise in use over the past few years in areas other than Mount McKinley has been accompanied by observations of resource impacts, such as large amounts of exposed human waste on the Pika Glacier. While the National Park Service also wishes to avoid unnecessary regulation, we agree that it could be important to obtain accurate visitor use data through registration in areas where resource impacts are occurring if other methods for obtaining this information would be ineffective.

AAC-7

The BCMP does commit the National Park Service to establishing convenient mechanisms for backcountry registration where it is required. The 60-day advance registration requirement and mountaineering fees for Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker are driven by conditions specific to those peaks, and are not anticipated to serve as a model for any additional registration requirements in mountaineering areas. However, decisions about fees or advance registration are implementation-level decisions that are not considered in this plan, but these concerns would be taken into account if new registration requirements were proposed during implementation.

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registration delays can have a profound impact on climber safety and success by making climbers wait to attempt routes that may be in condition for only a very brief period of time.

COMMERCIAL SERVICES

It is important to recognize that National Parks, by regulation (36 CFR 5.3), are set aside as commercial free zones. Commercial activities, with few exceptions, must be specifically authorized by park management and must meet certain minimum conditions. As the revised draft BMP notes on page 56, NPS management policies require that the Park Service determine that: 1) the proposed commercial service is “necessary and appropriate” and cannot be achieved outside of the park boundaries, 2) that the provision of the commercial service will be provided “in a manner that furthers the protection, conservation, and preservation of the environment and park resources and values,” and 3) the proposed commercial service will “enhance visitor use and enjoyment without causing unacceptable impacts to park resources or values.”

The BMP on page 57 indicates that in park additions and preserve areas where the numbers of visitors are limited, guided or educational use would be limited to less than a majority of total potential use of the area. In the Old Park, guided and educational use would generally be less than 25% of the total potential use. While the BMP does not address this issue directly, AAC analysis of past NPS mountaineering reports finds that actual historic guided climbing use of Mount McKinley has averaged 29% of total climber use over 21 years dating back to 1978. (The number of commercial guides and clients is not reported in every year.) Nevertheless, in no instance during this period did total commercial use exceed 25% of the proposed 1,500 climber cap proposed for Mount McKinley. The AAC views guided climbing use as a legitimate method of making this experience available to those who, for various reasons, are not able to arrange an independent expedition. We support this commercial use limit, but are concerned about the inclusion of the phrase “generally be less than” since it seems to provide a malleable cap that could be open to abuse in the future.

A significant concern exists in the area of commercial service provision for scenic flight glacier landings and the potential for commercial snowmachine access. The BMP does not articulate when and how a determination was made that scenic flight glacier landings meet the requirements set forth in NPS management policies for an allowed commercial activity. The methodology articulated on page 385 of the BMP notes that scenic air tours “are appropriate in Denali’s backcountry because the wilderness setting enhances them, but they do not require wilderness.” This seems to conflict with the standard required to authorize a commercial service in the park, which requires that the activity *cannot* be achieved outside of the park. The activity also seems to conflict with the requirements that the commercial use not cause “unacceptable impacts to park resources or values” since the rapid growth in scenic flight glacier landings has been principally responsible for the degradation of natural sounds—especially in areas adjacent to major landing areas. Finally, the BMP seems to leave open the opportunity for other commercial activities not specifically listed in the BMP within management zone “A.” One could read into this that commercial snowmachine trips could be authorized in these areas of the park additions. Clarification on these points in the final BMP will be important to ensure that commercial activities are limited to those activities that are truly appropriate and do not conflict with park resources and values.

CLIMBING-SPECIFIC REGULATIONS

The AAC is pleased with the climbing-specific regulations contained in the revised draft BMP. Over the past four years an open exchange of information has occurred between the AAC, park planners and park managers, such that the plan contains pragmatic, well-reasoned and defensible approaches to managing climbing use in Denali National Park and Preserve. There is little we would seek to change in the following areas:

1. Mount McKinley Seasonal Capacity

As we noted in the 2003 draft BMP, the AAC believes that the number of people climbing Mount McKinley has flattened substantially and that it is unlikely that demand will exceed the 1,500 climber seasonal limit proposed in the plan. Even in the current season where a devalued U.S. Dollar increased the number of foreign climbers on the mountain, use increased only slightly above the previous all-time high of 1,305 climbers set in 2001 (Chart 1). The seasonal average for climbers on Mount McKinley has not changed

Response to Comments

AAC-8

The phrase was changed in the modified preferred alternative to remove the malleability of the allocation between guided and non-guided uses.

AAC-9

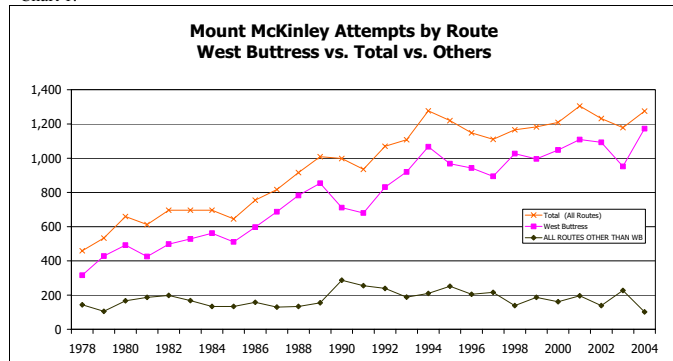
The two standards do not conflict. Although scenic air tours do not require wilderness, they do require access to the mountains and glaciers of the Alaska Range and Mount McKinley, which cannot be achieved outside of the park. The point of scenic air tours – particularly the authorized commercial landings – is to provide visitor experience and interpretation about these park resources that are specifically identified in legislation. The standards articulated in the plan are designed to prevent unacceptable impacts to park resources and values while still allowing a level of visitor use, including necessary and appropriate commercial services. Management Area A does allow new types of commercial services, but any such new service would still have to be “necessary and appropriate” and meet the other criteria described in the Commercial Services portion of this plan.

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significantly over the past 15 years—1,268 for the past five years, 1,216 for the past decade and 1,185 for the past 15 years. Use has been relatively flat over this period, and we do not expect this use to change based on overall demographic and visitor use trends affecting the broader outdoor industry.

Chart 1.



Beyond this overall flat trend in climbing use on Mount McKinley, the other important trend is a growing concentration of climbers on the well-managed West Buttress route. This means that any increase in climbing use would be assumed to be taking place on a route that can accommodate the use and that is heavily patrolled by the NPS climbing rangers.

2. Management of Fixed Climbing Anchors

The AAC supports the prohibition on the use of power drills throughout the park additions and preserve, an action that is in keeping with the wilderness character of these lands and one that will prevent widespread proliferation of fixed anchors. The proposed policy for fixed and removable anchors will ensure that these climbing tools—which are historic and necessary wilderness climbing tools—remain available to climbers for use in appropriate situations, but also will work to limit any excessive or inappropriate use. The policy proposed on pages 55-56 has been used successfully for several years at Rocky Mountain National Park, and it resembles the approach being proposed as a national policy for use by the four federal land management agencies in their wilderness areas.

3. Human Waste Management

The AAC was an early supporter of efforts to remove, as much as is practical, human waste generated by climbers in these high alpine zones where biodegradation is not possible. The AAC provided grant funding to develop the initial prototype “Clean Mountain Can” canisters, and provided a second grant to provide an adequate supply for initial field testing. Beyond merely providing funding, the AAC provided staff assistance to help test the canisters and then heavily promoted their use in Club publications and broader climbing industry magazines. In light of the recent epidemiological study regarding gastroenteritis outbreaks among climbers on the West Buttress route¹, we believe effective management and removal of human waste is of paramount importance to protecting the natural resource, as well as the health of climbers in the park and preserve.

Initially, the CMCs were designed to remedy human waste problems at the 17,000-foot camp where on-site disposal poses the greatest problems. We support the requirement that canisters will be required at and

¹ J.B. McLaughlin, B.D. Gessner, A.M. Bailey, “Gastroenteritis Outbreak Among Mountaineers Climbing the West Buttress Route on Denali—Denali National Park, Alaska, June 2002,” *Wilderness and Environmental Medicine*, 16, p. 92-96, 2005.

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above the 14,000-foot camp on the West Buttress route, as well as within 0.5 miles of glacier landing sites in other parts of the park. The AAC also believes that use of CMCs and removal of waste is feasible in areas on the West Buttress below the 14,000-foot camp where sleds are used, and we very much support the Park Service facilitating this environmentally beneficial practice. Nevertheless, we wish to emphasize that the current configuration of the CMCs makes them too big and bulky for use on more technical climbing routes. We do not want to see this protocol required in such areas where their use could pose a safety hazard to climbers.

The revised BMP is confusing regarding the overlap between the new human waste removal policy and the current policy (2004 Superintendent's Compendium), which the BMP notes would remain in place. Specifically, will CMCs be used exclusively at Kahiltna Base Camp since it is a campsite within 0.5 miles of a glacier landing site, or does the NPS intend to use the customary latrine as is noted in the current policy? This potential conflict needs to be clarified in the final BMP.

4. West Buttress Corridor

The AAC fully supports establishment of the seasonal West Buttress Corridor as a means of allowing the current high level of primitive recreational use occurring on the route. We do not believe that existing use on the West Buttress route violates any Congressional intent regarding wilderness solitude, but this special corridor sets appropriate expectations for the social conditions experienced on the route. As we have pointed out in prior communication, unique natural factors associated with travel in glaciated alpine terrain, such as crevasses and avalanche run-out zones, dictate that climbers travel and camp in established areas that concentrate use more than would occur in other areas of the park and preserve. The BMP must acknowledge and respect this unique aspect of mountaineering.

NATURAL SOUNDSCAPE PROTECTION AND RESTORATION

NPS Director's Order #47 clearly states that natural soundscapes are intrinsic elements in the park environment and are to be protected no less than wildlife or other natural resources. The NPS is directed to protect, maintain and restore the natural soundscape resource "to the fullest extent possible" to a condition "unimpaired by inappropriate or excessive noise sources." The directive mandates that soundscapes be protected if they are not currently impaired, and in the case of impaired soundscapes, they are to be restored "to the level consistent with park purposes, taking into consideration other applicable laws."

The revised draft BMP documents that aircraft in flight and during takeoff currently are degrading the natural soundscape for backcountry visitors in the park and preserve. The EIS portion of the revised draft BMP indicates that most sound sampling data would violate all but the most tolerant proposed standard most of the time in many of the sampling locations—particularly those in the high alpine zones where lack of vegetation prevents attenuation of these unnatural sounds. Thus, the question for the BMP's forward-looking policy must be how to restore the degraded soundscape, not how additional degradation can occur through new and expanded uses causing soundscape degradation, such as allowing recreational snowmobile activity throughout a wide swath of the southern park additions. It is particularly disturbing to see that the draft BMP proposes allowing this significant soundscape degradation to continue for five years of further study before commencing any enforcement action. The Park Service is required to manage these wilderness-suitable lands to protect their wilderness character, but the draft BMP notes on page 312 that unchecked aircraft and snowmachine noise would impair the wilderness resource and possibly make these park additions unsuitable for wilderness designation. Clearly, waiting a further five years before taking action is wholly unacceptable and would lead to significant further degradation of natural soundscapes and wilderness character.

Given the mandate in Director's Order #47 to restore degraded soundscapes, it is shocking that the Park Service would put forward a plan that allows some backcountry areas to have degraded soundscapes up to half of any hour in the day and up to 50 motorized noise intrusions a day. This could translate into more than two motorized noise intrusions every hour throughout a 24-hour period, or more than four intrusions every hour if use occurs primarily within a 12-hour period. Even more shocking is the fact that Table 4-1 on page 283 indicates that this absurdly high standard would have been violated in the Ruth Amphitheater

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AAC-10

The modified preferred alternative clarifies that if a pit latrine is provided at a landing area then CMCs are not required.

AAC-11

Successful implementation of the Visitor Experience-Resource Protection planning model – of which indicators and standards are a part – requires the use of accurate information. The National Park Service recognizes that more information is needed before full implementation could occur, and believes that 5 years is sufficient time to gather data to share with the public.

Although environmental analysis concluded that the natural sound resource would be impaired within the 20-year life of the plan if no action is taken, the National Park Service does not believe that would be the case within 5 years, particularly given other proactive measures in the plan such as addressing overflights through the Aircraft Overflights Working Group and limiting the geographic area available to scenic air tour landings.

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more than 57% of the days based on sound sampling performed for seven days during July 2002. One expects degradation of soundscapes at this level at an urban airport, not well inside the boundary of one of the largest wilderness parks in the United States.

The AAC is aware that some may minimize the impact of degraded soundscapes to park visitors. Skeptics may say that the noise is only transitory and leaves no permanent impact on the landscape. However, for a climber or backcountry skier who invests a significant amount of time and resources to experience the Denali backcountry, the temporary disruption is all they will experience. The soundscape degradation will occur during their entire visit, and in some places like the Ruth Amphitheater, it will last for more than half the hours they are visiting the park. These factors effectively make the intrusion permanent. The skeptic's argument is analogous to saying that trampling of summer wildflowers is only temporary since it only occurs during a brief window when visitation occurs. This brief window of plant activity, however, is the only period during the whole year when the wildflower is not dormant. Since Director's Order #47 makes natural soundscapes equivalent in importance to natural and wildlife resources, we find it hard to believe the NPS would put forward a plan that allows half of the wildlife in the park to be harmed or half the vegetation to be trampled. Given the park's own policies, soundscape degradation of this magnitude cannot continue and restoration must begin immediately.

The revised draft BMP dances around the root cause of this soundscape degradation—tremendous growth in scenic flight traffic. The BMP is conspicuous in the omission of data reporting the number of overflights that do not land in the park. One suspects, however, that they exceed the number of flights that include glacier landings. Even when looking at the flights that do land on glaciers, which must be reported to the NPS, one finds wholly incomplete data showing long-term trends. Tables that are included indicate that the vast majority of flights and the most significant area of growth over the past six years are attributable to scenic flights, not air taxi landings. As table 3-16 notes, scenic flights that land on glaciers represented 67% of all aircraft that landed on glaciers in the park between 1999 and 2004. Further analysis of Table 3-16 shows that between 1999 and 2004, total air taxi flights declined by 7% despite carrying 17% more air taxi passengers into the Denali backcountry. Meanwhile, total scenic flights that land on glaciers increased by 20% and transported 47% more passengers. (As a means of comparison, climbing use on Mount McKinley—which the BMP felt needed to be capped to prevent excessive growth—increased only 8% during the same period.) Given the recent significant increases in primarily scenic flights driven by the influx of cruise ship passengers, one suspects that scenic flight glacier landings have increased at a significantly more dramatic rate than climbing use on Mount McKinley. Clearly, degradation of natural soundscapes has occurred primarily through increased scenic flights, a factor that is not addressed adequately in the draft BMP and must be rectified in the final BMP.

Though aircraft currently pose the greatest degradation to existing soundscapes, the potential for incursions by snowmachines is also quite concerning. As the draft BMP notes, snowmachines are already entering the southern park additions, and the concern is that more powerful snowmachines will allow riders to expand the area of the park that is subject to snowmachine noise and pollution. The fact that snowmachines have proceeded past the icefall, through the Ruth Gorge and into the Don Sheldon Amphitheater raises serious concerns that snowmachines will soon be a major new source of soundscape degradation in many areas that historically have been used solely by climbers if they are not tightly controlled. Given the broad area designated as zone "A" in the preferred alternative in which purely recreational snowmachine use will be allowed, only terrain and technological limitations will forestall climber/snowmachine conflicts at the Kahiltna Base Camp, the Ruth Gorge and Amphitheater, and many other popular climbing destinations in the southern park additions.

Soundscape preservation may be an esthetic concern to most wilderness and backcountry visitors, but to climbers it is also a significant safety issue. Climbers rely on voice commands to communicate with their partners. Sometimes partners may be more than 165 feet apart—often vertically—where communication is difficult even with only the background noise of wind, rockfall, and avalanches. The duration and intensity of soundscape intrusions can create hazardous situations in which a climber cannot communicate with his/her partner. When coupled with the fact that most scenic flights fly over the Ruth Glacier, the Kahiltna

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AAC-12

Any soundscape degradation, whether it is considered transitory or permanent, is of concern to the National Park Service. However, as long as the resource is not impaired the National Park Service can allow some degradation to accommodate visitor use. Although standards in the Ruth Glacier Special Use Area do allow natural sound disturbance up to 50% of any hour, this area comprises a small fraction of the area of the park and preserve for a 5-month season. Because the modified preferred alternative calls for restoration of the natural soundscape over the Denali Wilderness, allows very high levels of natural sound disturbance over only a small portion of the park additions, and limits the disturbance even in that area, the National Park Service concluded that impairment would not occur. As a result, the actions of the modified preferred alternative are within the National Park Service's legal and policy authorities. This conclusion would hold whether the described impacts are characterized as "temporary" or "permanent." The one place where the characterization of "permanent" could conceivably make a difference is in the evaluative tool used to determine an impact level of negligible, minor, moderate, or major. The cumulative adverse impact to natural soundscape is already determined to be "major."

AAC-13

The National Park Service agrees that the growth of scenic air tours are a primary reason for the degradation of natural soundscapes at Denali and that they have increased at a much faster rate than climbing and mountaineering activity in the Alaska Range. The data cited by the comment appears in chapter 3: Affected Environment of the *Revised Draft EIS* and supports these assertions. No additional data are available concerning scenic air tours that fly over but do not land at Denali, so the National Park Service cannot make specific conclusions on this subject. Nonetheless, the cumulative impacts analysis does appropriately highlight the role of scenic air tours in increasing motorized noise at the park, concluding the following:

Denali National Park and Preserve has become a noisier place since the park expansion in 1980. Aircraft are primarily responsible for increased natural sound disturbance, particularly the expansion of scenic air tours since the late 1980s, which produce much of the existing motorized noise over the eastern portion of the Old Park, around Mount McKinley, and along the south side of the Alaska Range between the Kahiltna and Eldridge Glaciers.

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Glacier, the West Buttress, and the summit of Mount McKinley—all terrain used principally by mountaineers—the soundscape impacts on climbers exceed those for other park visitors. These safety concerns related to soundscape degradation are not discussed in the revised draft despite being raised by the AAC two years ago. They need to be addressed in the final BMP.

The AAC believes Alternative 3 strikes the best balance between soundscape preservation and recreational access. Alternative 3 will allow air taxis to land throughout the park additions and preserve, which will continue access to current climbing areas and the potential to provide access to future climbing areas. The prohibition on scenic flight landings between 9 p.m. and 9 a.m. will lessen the most intrusive noise impacts for backcountry visitors camped at or near landing areas during half the day when people are generally sleeping. The prohibition on landing at the Kahiltna Base Camp prior to July 1 of each year will minimize conflicts between climbers and sightseers. As the BMP notes on page 373, these combined restrictions would have affected only 10% of scenic flight landings. Given the fact that even the most tolerant soundscape standards will require shifting use out of the Ruth Amphitheater, these restrictions will ensure scenic flight landings do not overrun other climber destinations in the southern park additions as already occurred in the Ruth Gorge and Amphitheater. Prohibitions on recreational snowmachine use will virtually guarantee that there are no future user conflicts between climbers and snowmachine operators in historic climbing terrain.

Unfortunately, there is little in Alternative 4 that will restrict future growth in soundscape degradation through aircraft and snowmachine use. The BMP notes on page 376 that “Businesses providing scenic flights could therefore be expected to experience steady growth in income from this activity during the near future and throughout the 20-year life of the plan.” If soundscape standards in one major landing area are exceeded, tour operators need only scout a new location within the “A” zone. The only exception is the restriction on landing scenic flights at the Eldridge and Pika Glacier landing areas when climbers are present. Otherwise, scenic flight operators could pioneer glacier landing areas within the expanded Ruth Glacier Special Use Area and the “A” zone limited only by topography and conditions of the glaciers. Similarly, allowing recreational snowmachine access throughout the “A” zones will mean potential user conflicts wherever technology and terrain allow visitors to travel. The effect will be to give motorized uses preference to these remote backcountry areas over climbing and other wilderness-dependent uses that were a reason for protection of these areas in the first place.

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VISITOR USE AND EXPERIENCE

Aircraft access to the park and preserve is a double-edged sword. Due to the great distances, harsh terrain and length of time needed to approach climbing objectives by foot, aircraft are the principal means of access to the Alaska Range. However, scenic flights and glacier landings have grown dramatically over the years to the point that they now dominate all air travel over the park. Because aircraft noise currently is the greatest contributor to degraded soundscapes, the AAC believes the NPS must refocus management regulations contained in the BMP on the purposes for which Denali National Park and Preserve was established. If soundscape protection standards necessitate limits on use, preference should be given to uses that were listed by Congress as reasons for establishment of the park or its additions and preserve areas rather than uses that were not specifically intended and may not even be appropriate.

Facilitating mountaineering access was the catalyst for pioneering flights into the Mount McKinley area, first with a landing in 1932 on the Muldrow Glacier, then with the establishment of commercial flights from Talkeetna to the Kahiltna Glacier in 1954. Ferrying mountaineers was the mainstay of flight services for many years, but they eventually discovered that there were far more tourists desirous of a 90-minute scenic flight over the Alaska Range than there were climbers wanting to embark on multi-day climbing expeditions. The explosive growth in scenic flights over the last few years has been fueled in large measure by the package tour and cruise ship industry that brings in ever larger numbers of visitors to the park. As the draft BMP notes, new hotels in adjacent communities built to serve the package tour business portend even greater numbers of tourists who will seek to experience Denali National Park and Preserve largely by scenic flights.

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Since the cumulative impacts analysis concludes that major adverse impacts have occurred to natural soundscapes and that aircraft, particularly scenic air tours, are primarily responsible, the National Park Service believes this point was adequately addressed in the *Revised Draft EIS* and *Final EIS*.

AAC-14

Safety has been added as a topic of concern for the Aircraft Overflights Working Group, which can include both safety for aircraft and passengers as well as safety for mountaineers on the ground. The National Park Service does not have any reports of aircraft noise drowning out belay commands, and so was unable to address this concern in any greater detail.

AAC-15

The plan establishes limits for soundscape degradation through the expressed standards, and identifies the tools the National Park Service would use to enforce those limits. Additional growth in air tour business could come at least in part through heightened efficiency of passenger seating and use of the areas available. For instance, the move to larger planes and more complete use of seating on each flight allowed the concessioners to collectively increase passenger volume by about 1,300 people, about 11%, from 2000 to 2004, while actually decreasing the number of glacier landings from 3,117 to 2,880. The National Park Service remains concerned about the volume of airplanes continuing to rise over time and spreading to presently unused portions of the range. In 2005, the number of landings reached 3,223 and record numbers of landings were reported on both the Pika and Eldridge glaciers. However, given the carrying capacity restrictions in the modified preferred alternative, the National Park Service anticipates the scenic air tour business will have a strong incentive to continue finding efficiencies and finding ways to decrease impacts (for example, use of quiet technology) in order to allow for continued business growth.

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The AAC is aware of the limited powers the NPS has to manage scenic flights that do not actually land in the park. We support your efforts to provide scenic flight operators with management designations of the park and encourage them to route flights over the appropriately designated zones. We also support the establishment of an overflight advisory committee, but request that at least one mountaineering organization be a part of that committee. Climbers are probably the most significantly affected visitor group in the park from overflights and glacier landings, since the routes generally chosen fly over the most dramatic climbing terrain and the summit of McKinley, and the landings occur almost exclusively in landing sites adjacent to major climbing base camp areas. Though not specifically listed in the draft BMP, the AAC would like to see greater emphasis placed on achieving the soundscape goal of Director's Order #47 to "reduce the noise level consistent with the best technology available." Scenic flight operators should be encouraged through incentives to adopt the best technology available for their planes, and use of best available technology should be required of concessionaires who are allowed to land in the park. This would not lessen the number of overflights that visitors see, but it would lessen the degradation of soundscapes.

Though both air taxis and scenic flights degrade the natural soundscape, the AAC believes there is a major distinction between the two. The former is a means of access for people who endeavor to experience the mountain environment in its purest form. ANILCA specifically listed mountaineering and wilderness recreation as purposes for the park addition and preserve areas, and it allowed for "reasonable access" to these areas, which we interpret as aircraft access. As the revised draft BMP notes, the average climber on Mount McKinley stays 17 days, so flights in and out are small intrusions on the natural soundscape relative to the length of time these visitors will spend in the backcountry. In contrast, the average scenic flight passenger spends 90 minutes flying over the park—two hours if a glacier landing is involved—and essentially all of the time is spent in the plane. Assuming a total of three hours is required to fly in and fly out a McKinley climber, that person damages the natural soundscape for a less than 1% of the climber's visit, while the scenic flight passenger damages the natural soundscape for almost 75% of his visit.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

After considerable review, the AAC rejects the Park Service's endorsement of Alternative 4 as the preferred alternative. As your own analysis notes, Alternative 4 will not address past degradation of wilderness character and natural soundscapes, and it provides little protection against future degradation of these and other natural resource conditions. We believe it is untenable for the Park Service to endorse an alternative that it acknowledges will not meet the goals and objectives set forth for the management plan.

The AAC believes Alternative 3 provides the best protection of the natural resources, social conditions and settings in which intended, wilderness-dependent recreational activities can occur over the 10-20-year anticipated lifespan of this Backcountry Management Plan. Listed below are some of the reasons the AAC believes Alternative 3 is far superior to Alternative 4 in meeting the goals and objectives established in the BMP.

- Alternative 4 allows recreational snowmachine access throughout all areas contained in management zone "A" and designated access corridors. This would allow snowmachines to gain access to most of the established climbing and mountaineering areas noted in Map 2-6, which would provide further degradation to wilderness conditions required for climbing. In contrast, Alternative 4 only allows snowmachine use for "traditional" and "subsistence" purposes.
- Alternative 3 protects a more balanced allocation of management area zones providing a broader array of recreational uses appropriate for the purposes set forth in Denali National Park and Preserve's authorizing legislation. Specifically, Alternative 3 protects 33% of the park addition/preserve lands for extended expeditions where other parties and signs of civilization are generally not encountered, while Alternative 4 protects no lands with this as a goal. Similarly, Alternative 3 zones roughly 50% more lands for primitive climbing and mountaineering experiences—one of three reasons Congress protected these lands initially—than does Alternative 4.
- The areas protected in zone "C" under Alternative 4 do not in any way correlate to areas possessing current, historic or potential significant climbing destinations; the designation appears

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to be placed over those areas that are not viewed as desirable for scenic flight purposes. Of the nine “popular climbing and mountaineering areas” listed on Map 3-4, only three (Little Switzerland/Pika Glacier, Rampart Mountains, and Eldridge Glacier) appear to be contained by zone “C” designation in Alternative 4. In contrast, Alternative 3 appears to add the Moose’s Tooth (Buckskin Glacier area), Mount Hunter, and the Kahiltna Base Camp to those areas protected by this zone, though it appears the Rampart Mountains would drop out into the less protective zone “B.” Though Alternative 3 is preferable to Alternative 4, even here it does little to protect the popular climbing areas between the Ruth Special Use Area and the wilderness boundary that should be protected for their wilderness climbing characteristics.

- The seasonal Ruth Glacier Special Use Area, which accommodates intensive use by scenic flight trips, is significantly expanded in Alternative 4. In contrast, the area in Alternative 3 is more closely matched with areas currently used by flight services.
- Alternative 3 provides reasonable restrictions on the hours scenic flights may fly and contains safeguards that lessen the impact of scenic flight glacier landings on those areas used primarily by wilderness-dependent mountaineers. A seasonal restriction would reserve the Kahiltna Base Camp glacier landing strip for air taxi access through the end of the customary climbing season, and would prohibit landings between the hours of 9 p.m. and 9 a.m.—not an academic concern given the near constant light during the tourist and climbing seasons.

In short, Alternative 3 focuses regulations so that they provide reasonable future growth for activities that are consistent with the park’s intended purposes as expressed by Congress, but would seek to restrain inconsistent activities that are proving to be detrimental to park resources and values.

CONCLUSION

The AAC is conflicted by the revised draft Backcountry Management Plan. The overall vision is laudable, but simply cannot be achieved based on the timid management actions proposed by the BMP.

Mountaineering, a congressionally intended activity that was specifically listed as a reason for designating the park additions and preserve areas, is the only activity requiring advance permitting. Despite flattening of use over the last half-decade, climber levels on Mount McKinley will be capped, and registration is likely to be expanded to other areas to monitor climbing use. Mountaineering causes effectively no impact on the physical park resource beyond the disposal of human waste, which the BMP intends to lessen through a detailed pack-out program. Attention is placed on the tools allowed for climbing and the social impacts climbers have on each other, though neither has an appreciable impact on other park visitors or natural resources.

Meanwhile, the BMP is largely silent regarding the rapidly growing threat posed by scenic flights and snowmachines, both of which are growing rapidly and cause significant degradation of natural soundscapes, harassment of wildlife and, in the case of snowmachines, cause significant impacts to soils, plants and water sources. Little analysis is included about the rapid growth of both activities, and the few tables that contain such information is not analyzed in much detail. Neither use was specifically intended by Congress for either the “Old Park” or the park additions and preserve areas, and there is some question about whether these activities can be allowed legally. Yet, the revised draft BMP’s preferred alternative will set aside almost three-times as much area in the park additions and preserve areas to accommodate these non-conforming uses as is set aside to accommodate wilderness-dependent climbing.

The AAC is troubled that the preferred alternative will not achieve the overarching themes contained in the BMP’s goals and visions, does little to rectify past degradation of natural soundscapes and wilderness character, and provides scant protection against further degradation to physical and social resources and values of Denali National Park. We believe the preferred alternative will impair the resource, and recommend that the final Backcountry Management plan adopt Alternative 3 as a more reasoned, effective means of ensuring the park’s viability for the next 10-20 years.

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Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions or concerns regarding the points raised in this letter.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lloyd F. Athearn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

LLOYD F. ATHEARN
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

Response to Comments

Comments

Comments and support materials also sent via regular mail.

July 5, 2005

Superintendent Paul Anderson
Denali National Park
PO. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755-0009

RE: Comments on Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan for Denali National Park and Preserve

Dear Superintendent Anderson:

On behalf of Bluewater Network -- a division of Friends of the Earth, and the countless concerned citizens we represent I respectfully submit the following comments on the Park Service's (NPS) revised draft backcountry management plan (RDEIS) for Denali National Park and Preserve.

Bluewater Network appreciates the time and effort that went into the plan. We fully support the NPS desire to bring its backcountry management into compliance with recent legislative mandates, visitor patterns, and new recreational technologies. The RDEIS is a step in the right direction. Bluewater Network supports the "People for the Parks Alternative: A Better Future for Denali" because it best protects park resources while permitting appropriate recreation activities and visitor services. We urge the NPS to adopt this alternative.

Issues that Need More Attention

Previous Comments

First, we ask that all comments Bluewater Network has submitted on previous versions of this backcountry management plan be included in the RDEIS official record. A copy of those comments is enclosed.

In addition, we provide the following information to provide a proper context as well as counter some incorrect information so that the NPS may better judge its current alternatives against the "Better Future" alternative. Specifically we draw the NPS attention to the following; the Organic Act compliance of its preferred alternative, Alaska's interpretation of federal law such as ANICLA and the Wilderness Act, the non-traditional use of off-road vehicles such as ATV and snowmobiles, and climate change.

Organic Act Compliance

Bluewater Network is concerned that the RDEIS does not comply with the legislative mandates contained within the Organic Act and its amendments. The Organic Act

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requires the NPS to leave park resources and wild life under its care “unimpaired” for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Unfortunately, the preferred alternative does not meet this requirement. In fact, the NPS admits on page 25 of the RDEIS that unless the agency receives staffing and funding increases – which are unlikely occurrences -- “it would not be possible to prevent impairment of park resources values given increases in visitor use.” To wit, Denali’s 2004 budget was down \$262,000 from the previous year. Despite the decreased budget, 2004 visitation was actually up roughly 20 percent from last year, placing increased demand upon already tight NPS resources. We fear that adopting alternative four is an unwarranted leap of faith by the Park Service and will only make matters worse, ultimately leading to the impairment of park resources, wild life, and values.

ORV and Snowmobile Use

On page 27 of the RDEIS the NPS states that off-road vehicle (ORV) operation and snowmobile access in the old park was considered but is not addressed in this plan. If we understand the NPS correctly, this means that plans and regulations addressing these uses will not be promulgated for the old park. We support these decisions. However, we urge the NPS to address ORV and snowmobile operation on park lands outside the old park.

Specifically, we ask the NPS to follow New York State’s lead which is finalizing policy to eliminate the recreational use of thrillcraft such as all terrain vehicles (ATV) on state lands. Specifically, the state’s draft ATV policy states that New York will not “encourage ATV use on [state] lands.” However, the state recognizes that ATV can be used as “means” to access other activities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, etc. In other words, the recreational use of ATV will be prohibited. The state is adopting this new plan in order to address the “critical” and “impending impacts of public ATV access.”

Alaska Interpretation of ANICLA

Next, the NPS is giving too much weight to Alaska’s May 30, 2003 comments on the 2003 Draft Backcountry Management Plan. First, the state’s interpretation of the Alaska National Interest Conservation Lands Act (ANICLA) is seriously flawed. In particular, Alaska asserts that ANICLA section 1110(a) requires that NPS to show damage to “real” resources before it can restrict access. Moreover, the state implies that those resources do not include immeasurable, intangible aesthetic values and experiences such as soundscapes. However, ANICLA does not place any limits on the NPS’ ability to define the resources and experiences it is required to protect. Rather it states the Secretary can prohibit an activity if it damages “the resource values of the unit or area.” If Congress had meant to limit protection to what the state defines as “real” resources it would have explicitly stated such in the law. It did not. Rather, Congress requires the NPS to protect the area’s “resources values” which clearly includes the protection of non-tangible and more esoteric resources.

Along with a questionable reading of federal law, the state asserts that federal regulations require a factual determination of impact “on tangible, measurable resources of the unit as part of the rulemaking process.” The state appears to have made this requirement up out of whole cloth, for 43 CFR Part 36.11(h) merely restates the ANICLA requirement

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See NPCA-9.

BN-2

Statute and regulation already appear to provide the necessary emphasis on utilitarian usage of off-road vehicles and snowmachines. Generally, ORVs are only permitted in the Denali backcountry where traditionally employed for subsistence purposes. Some owners of land within park boundaries are also permitted to use ORVs by Section 1110(b) of ANILCA for access to their land. The use of snowmachines is allowed “for traditional activities” and “for subsistence purposes.” See the discussion in chapter 1, Applicable Laws, Regulations, and Policies. Also, see NPCA-18 and TWS-16.

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that closures be based on impacts to “resource values” and makes no mention of limiting determinations to tangible or measurable resources.

Third, in statements such as “ANICLA mandated access and use may not be subjectively curtailed by noise concerns” the state seems to argue that the NPS has no leeway to interpret its ANICLA mandates. Putting aside the fact that the state’s analysis appears to allow the NPS to limit access based on “non-subjective” noise analysis, the courts have consistently held that federal agencies such as the NPS are free to reasonably interpret their legislative mandates. This is exactly what the 2001 management policies do when they require the agency to protect soundscapes and other intangible resources. Finally, if the state believes so strongly that the 2001 policies violate ANICLA they could have easily challenged them in court. They didn’t, seriously calling into question the reality of their position.

Climate Change

We also urge the NPS to begin addressing climate change and its impact upon park resources. The RDEIS is an excellent opportunity to begin the process of preventing and mitigating changes that will result from rising global temperatures. Over the past 100 years, emissions of greenhouse gas pollution have led to increased global temperatures of more than 1°F, an unprecedented event in the last 1,000 years. Scientists worldwide predict that the pace of global climate change will accelerate over the next century and impact ecosystems with increasingly dramatic results. Average global temperature increase is projected to result in reduced water availability, increased catastrophic wildfires and storms, and habitat impacts that could wipe out entire species and ecosystems. Scientists predict a rise in sea level of up to 2.89 feet as a result of projected global temperature increases. Coupled with increasingly severe storm events, a sea level rise of this magnitude will reshape coastlines and submerge low-elevation islands entirely in both the U.S. and abroad. These global climate change impacts will occur so rapidly that many plant and wildlife species will not survive.

The Arctic in general and Denali National Park in particular will not be immune to these impacts. For example, the park’s diverse ecosystem could be altered, with warmer temperatures causing the melting permafrost, severe storms, drought, and exotic species spread. The National Park Service should encourage further study of global warming impacts and incorporate a plan for mitigation measures from such impacts in the park.

Conclusion

National Parks such as Denali are a great gift. Our grandparents put aside their short-term interests and invested in protecting these areas so that we may enjoy them today. At a minimum we owe it to our grandchildren to do the same. Selfish, short term, profit motivated interest should not guide the Park Service’s backcountry management plan. Rather, a long term vision, based upon the common good must be the guiding philosophy for all park management decisions. The RDEIS must also preserve as many options as possible for those future generations. In this light we urge the NPS adopt People for the

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The impacts of climate change are outside the scope of the backcountry management plan, which is only a limited General Management Plan amendment that primarily addresses visitor use in the park backcountry.

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Parks Alternative: A Better Future for Denali. It best protects park resources and values, while insuring appropriate and adequate public enjoyment.

Sincerely,

Sean Smith
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July 15, 2005

Paul Anderson
Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve
PO Box 9
Denali Park, Ak 99755

Dear Superintendent Anderson,

On behalf of Denali Citizens Council (DCC) and the Northern Alaska Environmental Center (NAEC), thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan for Denali National Park and Preserve. We appreciate the assistance we've received from you and your entire planning staff over the course of this plan. We intend, with these comments, to provide you with substantive suggestions (numbered serially and in bold type) for how to create a final plan that better protects and preserves the unique resources and values of Denali's almost 6 million acres of backcountry, nearly 4 million acres of which are suitable for Wilderness designation and 2 million acres of which are statutory Wilderness.

The 300+ members of Denali Citizens Council and the 1,000+ members of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center favor maintaining Denali's natural integrity and wilderness character. Our founders actively supported increasing the size of Denali National Park and Preserve through the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. We continue to support the purpose for adding these 4 million acres - maintenance of an intact ecosystem including the entire Denali mountain massif, and provision opportunities for wilderness recreational activities. In addition, ANILCA specifies that the northern additions were made for ecosystem protection and protection of subsistence lifestyles. With this intent in mind, we are grateful that backcountry management guidelines for the northern additions emphasize resource protection and wilderness character in the RDEIS.

We recognize the importance of selecting a backcountry management strategy that accurately carries out the intent of legislation and park policy for Denali. We also recognize the importance of maintaining the "National Park difference" when managing Denali's backcountry. National Park Service's enabling legislation, the Organic Act, set down this "difference." It provided for the highest degree of resource protection on Park Service lands, and required that use of these lands must be consistent with protection of resource values. Other public lands do not carry this preservation mandate to such a high degree, and focus instead on multiple use and accommodation of a wide range of consumptive use and the attendant negative ecological impacts.

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The Park Service's commitment to preservation of wilderness resources such as natural sound, intact ecosystem function, and the opportunity for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation is essential to the continued health of one of our park system's most internationally recognized achievements. To this end, DCC and NAEC have invested a large amount of time and energy engaging the public and discussing appropriate management measures with our Board, members, and community.

With that in mind, we are concerned that the Park Service has undertaken the creation of a Backcountry Management Plan that does not focus enough on monitoring the health of the Park and Preserve. Because of the unique wilderness resources and values of the Denali backcountry, the Backcountry Management Plan should focus on analyzing the health of the ecosystem, mitigating impacts that are presently occurring, and preventing future impacts. In this regard, both the design of the plan and the actions common to all alternatives are incomplete. Problems include:

- Creation of management zones in the backcountry that will impair wilderness resources and damage the Denali ecosystem
- An inadequate Wilderness Management Plan
- Inadequate mitigation of existing impacts to the Denali ecosystem
- Incomplete description of how NPS and the public will monitor and enforce the standards in the RDEIS.

NPS obligation to avoid impairment

Denali National Park and Preserve is one of the largest and longest protected intact ecosystems in the world. We, as you, are dedicated to retaining the protections forever. Your obligation begins in the Organic Act, which directs NPS to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them *unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations*." (16 U.S.C. §1) This obligation not only requires you to mitigate resource impairments as they are found, but to anticipate and avoid them. This preservation mandate is further enforced by the Redwood Act amendments to the Organic Act, which state

The authorization of activities shall be construed and the protection, management, and administration of these areas shall be conducted in light of the high public value and integrity of the National Park System and shall not be exercised in derogation of the values and purposes for which these various areas have been established, except as may have been or shall be directly and specifically provided for by Congress.
(16 U.S.C. §1-1a)

The Wilderness Act

Much of Denali National Park is wilderness. This condition is well described in the Wilderness Act of 1964 as one in which geography and wildlife exist in a natural condition, where there are opportunities for solitude in a place relatively unaffected by modern technology, and where the intrusion of mechanized activity is absent. The 2 million acre core park is already designated statutory Wilderness. Most of Denali's additions are suitable for Wilderness designation and must be managed for Wilderness suitability. We commend the NPS planners for listing opportunities for solitude, wilderness recreation, and natural soundscape as resource values in the RDEIS, and for providing indicators and standards with which to track these values. See our comments on the Wilderness Plan below.

Significance of ANILCA

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act added 4 million acres to then Mt. McKinley National Park in 1980. ANILCA instructed the parks to prepare management plans for all the parks,

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leading to this very plan, instructed all parks to review their lands for recommendation as statutory Wilderness, and provided some exceptions to then existing park management for certain activities on park lands. The two main exceptions were:

- Subsistence activities, including hunting and trapping, would be permissible on conservation system units established by ANILCA, if they were well established on those lands prior to 1980.
- Special access by snowmachines, airplanes and motorboats to reach inholdings and for traditional activities was permitted, subject to regulations to protect park resources.

Much is made of these exceptions to normal park management in the BCMP, but, as explained below, ANILCA's access provisions were created for special situations that existed prior to 1980, where there were pre-existing rural communities on lands incorporated into conservation system units, communities who relied on motorized transport between villages and for the consumptive activities consistent with living a rural life. Other than providing for reasonable, regulated access for existing traditional activities or to existing inholdings, nothing in ANILCA intends to expand the nature or scope of allowable activities within Alaska's national parks.

Relationship of this Plan to prior Denali Planning Documents

We are aware that the Final Backcountry Plan will be an amendment to the General Management Plan of 1986, prepared pursuant to ANILCA. The GMP laid out policy guidelines and facility planning for the future of Denali National Park and Preserve. The GMP recognized the many trends that would affect policy and planning for Denali over the next 20 years, including:

- Growth of large scale tourism in the Denali area, and the need to cap vehicle use on the park road.
- Desirability of developing an alternative visitor center on the South side of the mountain.
- Need for continuous resource management and monitoring.
- NPS intent to purchase the surface estate of mining claims in the park.
- NPS intent to perform and complete a Wilderness Suitability Review.

With the passage of nearly 20 years, the planning objectives of the GMP remain only partially realized. Motorized use by snowmachines in parts of the southern additions has become established, use of aircraft for scenic overflights and airplanes for access both in Kantishna and at several landing areas in the mountaineering area south of the park has increased dramatically. The growth of hotel accommodations in areas just outside the entrance to Denali has placed a great deal of pressure on park resources.

The Entrance Area and Road Corridor Plan, completed in 1997, planned for facilities development at the entrance area of the park to accommodate some of this demand and laid down stipulations for the park's road corridor to cap vehicle numbers there. Its companion document, this Backcountry Management Plan, will complete the planning guidance for the entire park and will amend the GMP, along with the South Denali Implementation Plan, still in draft form. These four documents will, as a whole, provide guidance for managing Denali into the next decade or two.

As such, it is important that these documents present a consistent message that prioritizes protection of the resource as a necessary precursor for a quality visitor experience.

To this end, we have three suggestions.

- 1. Clarify the difference in vision between management for the Park Frontcountry and the Backcountry.**

The Final Entrance Area and Road Corridor Plan, under General Vision (p. 14), states

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The National Park Service agrees that the backcountry experience is distinct from the frontcountry experience at Denali, and believes the General Vision expressed in the plan is consistent with NPS intent, as are the management actions. However, while the National Park Service intends for the frontcountry to be the location where visitor facilities and services such as food and restrooms are provided, the intent is not to restrict the entire backcountry only to those visitors who are capable of launching extended, independent backcountry expeditions. There are experiences to be had in the Denali backcountry that are appropriate for those visitors who want to learn about park resources that are not accessible from the road, or for those who want to learn how to travel in a wilderness setting, or for those who want to push themselves a little past their comfort level to experience wilderness on its own terms. These visitors may not wish or be able to spend as much time in the backcountry, or they may need the assistance of a guide. The backcountry should be accessible to these visitors.

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*The general vision for the frontcountry of Denali National Park and Preserve is for an area that, 15-20 years from now, still offers the nation's premier opportunities to observe large wildlife species and the highest peak in North America in a primitive, natural setting. The frontcountry area services and facilities would allow **as many visitors as possible** to view and experience these resources without degrading the resources or the premier visitor experience. (FEIS, p. 14)(emphasis added)*

The Revised Backcountry Management Plan, under General Vision, states

The National Park Service will preserve outstanding opportunities to view wildlife and mountain scenery, to experience wilderness, and to study wildlife, habitat and ecosystem patterns and processes in the backcountry of Denali National Park and Preserve.

***Denali will retain its unique status as a park that offers an undeveloped Alaskan wilderness park experience** distinct from the wilderness and park experience in the other states, while being more accessible than most national parks in Alaska because of the adjacent highway system and interior park road. In order to preserve the park's character and unique recreational opportunities, the National Park Service will seek to provide recreational opportunities in the Denali Park backcountry that are compatible with the unique resources and values for which the park was established. Other recreational activities can occur on adjacent public lands that possess excellent wildland qualities but also have broader management mandates that are more appropriate for some uses... (RDEIS, p. 10) (emphasis added)*

The final plan should emphasize that the backcountry experience is different from the frontcountry experience. For a more directed, comfortable and low time commitment Park experience, the frontcountry would be the appropriate location for a visitor. For experiences that may require more effort and time, and less convenience or assistance, the backcountry would be the preferred choice. It is unnecessary to provide convenient, quick and easy experiences in the backcountry and the two areas of the park should complement one another to provide the full range of opportunities.

2. Clarify the meaning and applicability of management zones in prior plans to promote internal consistency with the RDEIS.

In the GMP, the following terms are used to refer to zones or classifications of park lands. Are they being replaced by different terms in the RDEIS for Backcountry Management?

Natural Area, Park Development Zone, Special Use Zone, Outstanding Natural Feature Subzone

In the Entrance Area and Road Corridor EIS, the following terms are used to describe areas adjacent to the park road that verge on the backcountry. Do they still exist for the Revised Backcountry Plan? *Backcountry Day Use Zone, Development Zone D-1 and D-2, Motorized Sightseeing Zones 1,2 and 3, Hiker.*

3. Recognize that caps and limits to access and types of activities will be necessary to preserve Denali's wilderness backcountry, rather than assuming that South Denali development will absorb the extra demand, as stated in the GMP.

The General Management Plan (1986), at page 15, states that

...visitors who cannot be accommodated on the north side of the park can be accommodated on the south side once the proposal for south-side development is implemented. In fact, development of the south side of Denali as an alternative visitor destination is expected to provide additional recreational opportunities for

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DCC-2

Additional language has been added to chapter 1 to clarify the relationship among management zones between the 1986 *General Management Plan* and subsequent amendments, including this one.

DCC-3

The plan recognizes that caps on visitor use may be necessary to preserve wilderness resource values and other park resources. Establishing limits on the number of visitors is one of the tools for managing access to achieve the standards in the plan. However, the goal of the plan is not to limit visitation, but to protect park resources and a range of visitor opportunities. Caps on visitor use would be established only if necessary to protect park resources.

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visitors to Denali, resulting in a leveling off of demand for transportation services and accommodations in the northern part of the park.

This language is outdated, in view of rising demand and the need to protect this park into the distant future, when world population and demand will continue to rise. It is no longer easy to predict that south side development will absorb ALL the extra demand to visit Denali National Park and Preserve. NPS needs to take the opportunity provided by this Plan to assert a well known truth, that is, *to protect the resource and the visitor experience, caps on some types and levels of use are appropriate and necessary to protect resources.*

General Vision – Preferred Alternative 4

In an overview of Alternative 4, the preferred alternative, the RDEIS states that this plan would *provide opportunities for a variety of wilderness recreational activities and experiences by establishing areas to serve those visitors who want to experience the wilderness resource values of the Denali backcountry but require services, assistance or short time commitments. However, the areas would be of sufficient size to accommodate anticipated growth in the next 20 years and would be focused along the park road in the Old Park and Kantishna; at the Ruth, Tokositna and Kahiltina Glaciers; and in the Dunkle Hills/Broad Pass area. The remainder of the backcountry would be managed for dispersed, self-reliant travel, and would include opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations.* (RDEIS, p. 70)

Denali Citizens Council disagrees with the selection of Alternative 4 as the preferred alternative, for several reasons:

- NPS is not obliged to provide easy access to a “backcountry experience” through use of corridors and crowded portals. As stated above, these more convenient, assisted experiences should, where at all possible, be confined to the frontcountry.
- Management Area A designations for the identified areas (Kantishna, the Ruth, Tokositna and Kahiltina Glaciers and Dunkle Hills area) would, in our opinion, allow impacts that would impair suitability for Wilderness suitability in areas that you have agreed to manage for Wilderness suitability. There are no hard and fast rules out there that state unequivocally where the line is crossed to impairment, but Management Area A permits *High* encounter rates and natural sound disturbance, and *Medium* levels of Trail disturbance and evidence of modern human use. Taken as a whole, these standards seem too likely to impair wilderness character.
- The presence of high use corridors and air access portals in the Management Area A designations further impairs Wilderness suitability by setting the upward limit for its indicator at *Very High* encounter rates and *High* evidence of modern human use. Granted some of the corridors are in Kantishna, where much of the area is not deemed suitable for Wilderness designations. Simply because there are already over 200 overnight guests in Kantishna, however, does not justify the further encouragement of backcountry use, guided backpacking, and designated campsites. \

4. Our suggestion: Apply the Vision expressed in the Overview for Alternative 2 in the RDEIS, p. 61 to the Final Plan, as follows:

This alternative would distinguish a unique Denali experience based on dispersed use in a wilderness landscape with few sights or sounds of people or mechanized civilization. There would be few services, facilities or signs of management presence. This alternative would most clearly distinguish the backcountry experience in Denali

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DCC-4

Corridor and Portal management areas are necessary to provide access where travel options are limited. They are not in themselves necessary to provide “easy access” or “convenient, assisted experiences.” They are necessary to allow for access in some locations where airplane landing areas are limited or where travel corridors are confined, as on rivers. Visitors can use the Corridors or Portals for access before dispersing into surrounding areas for backcountry experiences that may in fact be quite arduous and lengthy.

DCC-5

Although Management Area A, Corridors, and Portals do allow for higher levels of use than in other portions of the park, it is difficult to conclude that they would impair wilderness resource values. There are many designated wilderness areas in the Lower 48 that receive this much use. Although Alaskan parks, and Denali in particular, should be held to a high standard for reasons articulated in chapter 1, it seems reasonable that some parts of the park and preserve could allow for higher levels of use that might be more typical of wilderness areas in more crowded parts of the country. Refer to the definition of impairment in the general Methodology section of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences.

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from the surrounding public lands, providing a place primarily for visitors who are very self-reliant, and would include many opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations. Backcountry users seeking other experiences would find those opportunities on neighboring lands.

This is arguably the only Vision that will protect and preserve the Denali Park Backcountry through many generations into the future. This Vision makes a *high quality wilderness recreation experience* more likely for our great grandchildren.

Wilderness Management

Denali National Park and Preserve was founded and expanded in part to preserve unaltered ecosystems in their natural state and to preserve wilderness values.¹ The Park and Preserve additions were specifically added to provide continued wilderness recreation activities.² ANILCA also adopted the definition of wilderness from the Wilderness Act.³ This definition states

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominated the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this chapter an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which

(1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable;

(2) has outstanding recreation opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;

(3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and

(4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historic value.⁴

As noted in your Wilderness Suitability Review, about 3.73 million acres of the Park and Preserve additions were found suitable for wilderness designation.⁵ Although NPS ultimately recommended wilderness designation for 2.25 million acres, the Secretary of the Interior and President never forwarded the request to Congress. Despite this fact, and although new activities are proposed in the Backcountry Management Plan that could degrade wilderness resources, the RDEIS proposes to present a legitimate Wilderness Management Plan.

To meet this statutory obligation, NPS must forward Wilderness recommendations, manage suitable Wilderness as de facto Wilderness, provide a valid Wilderness Management Plan, and mitigate ongoing activities that either impair wilderness resources or preclude future designations.

(1) Wilderness Designation and Recommendation

¹ 16 U.S.C. §§ 3101-3223 (See §101)

² Id. (See § 202)

³ Id. (See § 102)

⁴ 16 U.S.C. §§ 1131-1136.

⁵ NPS. Denali General Mgt. Plan/Land Protection Plan/Wilderness Suitability Review (1986).

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As stated above, the Secretary of Interior has failed to complete the Wilderness Designation process. During this time, there have been changes to the resources of the Park and Preserve additions. For example, in the twenty years since the Suitability Review, there have been reclaimed areas in the Kantishna Hills that would likely be identified as suitable for designation. There has also been a large increase in snowmachine use and other unacceptable impacts to the Park Preserve and Additions. Despite the fact that no action has been taken on this ANILCA mandate, NPS puts Wilderness Suitability and Wilderness Recommendations under the “Planning Issues Considered but Not Addressed” section of the document.⁶

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(2) Management of Lands Suitable for Wilderness Designation

As discussed above, the Park Service has made a formal finding that 3.73 million acres of the Park and Preserve are “suitable” for wilderness designation. Both the General Management Plan and Park Service regulations require that these lands be managed as statutory wilderness until the formal designation process is complete. As stated in the RDEIS, Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1 of Park Service Management Policies describes this obligation in detail:

For the purpose of applying NPS wilderness policies, the term ‘wilderness’ includes the categories of suitable, study, proposed, recommended and designated wilderness. NPS wilderness policies apply regardless of category . . . In addition to managing these classified areas for the preservation of their wilderness values, planning for these areas must ensure that the wilderness character is likewise preserved . . . The National Park Service will take no action that would diminish the wilderness suitability of an area possessing wilderness characteristics until the legislative process of wilderness designation has been completed. Until that time, management decisions pertaining to lands qualifying as wilderness will be made in expectation of eventual wilderness designation.⁷

The Denali General Management Plan, to which the Backcountry Plan is an amendment, similarly concludes that

[a]ll lands determined suitable for wilderness designation will be managed under the terms of ANILCA to maintain the wilderness character and values of the lands until designation recommendations have been proposed and Congress has acted on these proposals.⁸

Despite these mandates, however, the Park Service states that it will only manage the 2.25 million acres of *recommended* wilderness for wilderness values.⁹ This statement impermissibly lessens the management responsibility for the 1.48 million acres of remaining *suitable* wilderness that was not recommended. The Park Service must recognize that all lands suitable for wilderness must be managed as wilderness.¹⁰

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Similarly, you are obligated to manage the areas in the Kantishna Hills that are now suitable for wilderness as de facto wilderness. As stated in a 2002 Park Service guidance memorandum: “wilderness review is an on-going affirmative NPS obligation.”

⁶ RDEIS, pg. 26.

⁷ RDEIS, pg. 21.

⁸ Id.

⁹ RDEIS, pg. 26.

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DCC-6

See P&P-6.

DCC-7

This plan specifies that the National Park Service would manage the backcountry of Denali to protect wilderness resource values throughout the park and preserve because of legal direction from ANILCA, Denali’s specific management history and philosophy, public interest, and NPS Management Policies. NPS Management Policies specify that the agency “will take no action that would diminish the wilderness suitability of an area possessing wilderness characteristics until the legislative process of wilderness designation has been completed.” The statements in chapters 1 and 3 that referred to “recommended” wilderness have been removed in the modified preferred alternative.

Comments

(3) Wilderness Management Plan

Although the Backcountry Management Plan is proffered as a substitute for a Wilderness Management Plan, the preferred alternative under the Backcountry Management Plan allows heightened impacts to wilderness, authorizes illegal activities incompatible with wilderness, ignores the Park Service's failure to finish the Wilderness Recommendation process, and does not adequately evaluate and mitigate park wide and site specific impacts to the backcountry.

An adequate wilderness management plan must focus on the wilderness as a whole and provide for mitigation of impacts, monitoring of resources and strict enforcement. However, the RDEIS gives only a half hearted effort at producing a full fledged Wilderness Plan. The Wilderness Plan as included in the RDEIS is not a discreet plan but instead a hodge-podge of page references.

In appendix B, p. 489, you list the requirements for a full fledged Wilderness Plan. However, you admit that

This plan does not, however, follow the outline recommended in Appendix D of Reference Manual 41 for constructing Wilderness Management Plans since its primary purpose is to serve as a General Management Plan amendment and several wilderness plan components are addressed in other park planning documents.

Our suggestions are as follows:

- | | |
|--|----|
| 5. Compile a separate, free-standing or appended Wilderness Management Plan organized according to the outline shown in Appendix B of the RDEIS. Combine within this plan the bits and pieces that appear throughout the Backcountry Plan and other planning documents, that describe the Wilderness Act, legislative history, and your commitment to preserving wilderness resource values. Changes and additions are suggested below. | 8 |
| 6. Under "A. Goals and Objectives of the Plan," we applaud your inclusion of wilderness character and opportunities for solitude as core values and agree that they are measurable and can be tracked using visitor surveys and monitoring activities. The Goal Statement should reassert NPS resolve to forward Wilderness recommendations to Congress in a timely fashion for Denali's additions. We support the NPS recognition that Denali's northern additions have high wilderness values and relatively little impairment at present and urge you to insert language in the Wilderness Plan that supports non-degradation of the high resource values in this area. | 9 |
| 7. Under "Goals and Objectives" please include language that Denali's additions, 3.75 million acres of which have been deemed suitable for Wilderness designation, will be managed in a way to retain their Wilderness suitability, | 10 |
| 8. Under "B. Establish Desired Future Conditions," we argue that not all of the Management Areas to which you refer here could be applied to areas suitable for Wilderness designations, since they will allow encounter rates, evidence of modern use, trail and campsite disturbance and natural sound disturbance to reach a level that impairs Wilderness suitability. These areas are as follows: Management Area A, | 11 |

Response to Comments

DCC-8

The outline for a Wilderness Management Plan provided in NPS Reference Manual 41 provides recommended content only. Because almost all of the Denali backcountry falls under the provisions of NPS Management Policies that require a Wilderness Management Plan, and because so many elements of the GMP amendment and the Wilderness Management Plan would overlap, the sensible and efficient approach is to combine the two. The organization of the document adds coherency as compared to the recommended organization in Reference Manual 41.

DCC-9

See P&P-6.

DCC-10

One of the plan's objectives is to "protect and preserve the park's wilderness resource values, including its wilderness character and outstanding opportunities for solitude." It is elsewhere clarified that wilderness resource values are found throughout the backcountry, particularly in the Denali Wilderness and on lands deemed suitable for wilderness designation.

DCC-11

See above, DCC-5.

Comments

Portals, Corridors, Management Area C, and the mountaineering special use areas. A Wilderness Management Plan cannot set desired future conditions that would violate the principles of Wilderness Management. In other words, the Backcountry Management Areas described in the RDEIS cannot be applied in their entirety to the management structure of a Wilderness Management Plan.

9. Under “C, Establish Monitoring Indicators & D. Establish Standards for Indicators,” the indicators and standards that allow high levels of natural sound disturbance, high encounter rates and medium trail and campsite disturbance are again inappropriate to use for managing Wilderness and suitable wilderness, and thus should not be included in a Wilderness Plan.

10. Under, “Establish Visitor Use Levels,” the Wilderness Plan should commit to a reasonable monitoring strategy that has the intention of developing quotas for each Backcountry Unit that exists within areas suitable for Wilderness designation. This would include monitoring by at least two backcountry rangers plus a valid interview strategy to gather information from visitors and yearly analysis of data for at least the first five years of the plan.

12

11. Hiking group size. We support the establishment of a maximum group size of 12, as a general concept. However, the Wilderness Plan and the entire Backcountry Management Plan, should qualify this number by stating, “it may be necessary in some areas to limit group size to prevent resource damage and preserve a wilderness experience.” This would be especially true in the more mountainous areas of the park that are not ice or snow bound, such as the headwaters of the Teklanika, Sanctuary, Savage, Thorofare, Clearwater and Muddy Rivers, and all areas in OP-2.

13

Access Management – Snowmachines

One of the purposes of this plan will be to provide access management advice to the National Park Service. We agree that access is one of the most contentious aspects of the RDEIS, since access management covers mechanized activities in the park and additions, including snowmachine access, aircraft overflights, and aircraft landings for scenic and other purposes.

While we recognize that ANILCA granted access to snowmachines for traditional activities into the additions of Denali National Park and Preserve, this access is not unfettered. We urge NPS to get a handle on de facto recreational snowmachining by promulgating a rulemaking to define traditional activities for snowmachine use in the park additions. Below you will find the legal basis for our recommendation, based on the definition of traditional activities, and also on the resource impacts that are sure to occur from snowmachining.

(1) Traditional Activities

The preferred alternative permits recreational snowmachine use in the Park and Preserve under three alternatives, including the Park Service’s preferred alternative. The Park Service justifies this by failing to enforce ANILCA’s § 1110(a) which allows special snowmachine access “for traditional activities . . . and for travel to and from villages and homesites.”¹¹ Under several alternatives, including the preferred alternative, the RDEIS ignores ANILCA’s mandate and fails to distinguish between recreational

¹¹ 16 U.S.C. § 3170(a)

Response to Comments

DCC-12

See above, DCC-3

DCC-13

The modified preferred alternative establishes a maximum group size of six in Management Areas OP-2 and D. The Access tools provide additional flexibility to limit group size if necessary.

Comments

snowmachining, which includes racing, touring, and highmarking, and snowmachining for truly “traditional activities.” Congress provided for several examples of traditional activities for which it meant to grant access in § 1110(a): “subsistence and sport hunting, fishing, berrypicking, and travel between villages,” provided that the activity was generally occurring in the area before its designation in ANILCA.¹²

The Park Service has previously provided a definition for traditional activities, but has only applied the definition to the 2 million acres that makes up the Old Park. Tracking Congress’ intent, this definition states that a “traditional activity” is one that:

“generally and lawfully occurred in the Old Park contemporaneously with the enactment of ANILCA, and that was associated with the Old Park, or a discrete portion thereof, involving the consumptive use of one or more natural resources of the Old Park such as hunting, trapping, fishing, berry picking or similar activities. Recreational use of snowmachines was not a traditional activity. If a traditional activity generally occurred only in a particular area of the Old Park, it would be considered a traditional activity only in the area where it had previously occurred. In addition, a traditional activity must be a legally permissible activity in the Old Park.”¹³

This definition, which is based upon the Park Service’s statutory mandate to allow special access as an exception to the general prohibition, is reasonable and was adopted after a lengthy public process in which there was overwhelming support for protecting the unique character of Denali from the emerging non-traditional use of recreational snowmachines.

The RDEIS alternatives are formulated under the incorrect assumption that the Park Service has the latitude to interpret “traditional activities” in a manner that is inconsistent with the enabling legislation. While Alternatives 2 and 3 would correctly apply the Old Park definition to the ANILCA Park and Preserve additions, Alternatives 1, 4, and 5 allow recreational snowmachining by providing no additional guidance on what qualifies as a “traditional activity.”¹⁴ In the preferred alternative (Alt. 4), the Park Service simply states that snowmachining would be allowed for traditional activities. Placing their proverbial head in the sand, the Park Service pretends that by not defining traditional activities, they will not have to address the increasing illegal recreational snowmachine intrusions into Denali National Park and Preserve.

Despite this, the RDEIS states that “[t]he preferred alternative contains no explicit authorization for recreational snowmachine access.”¹⁵ This is ostensibly because the Backcountry Management Plan allows snowmachining only for undefined “traditional activities.” As any Denali area resident can tell you (and as many stated during the public hearings), there are often crowds of snowmachiners recreationally riding on Park and Preserve lands. This use, which is apparently not ‘explicitly’ authorized, is even implicitly encouraged through Park Service press releases letting the public know that the Park and Preserve additions are open for snowmachining.¹⁶

The Park Service must define “traditional activities” for the entire Park and Preserve. ANILCA does not apply only to certain sections of the Park. Defining a statutory mandate for one area of the Park and

¹² S. Rep. No. 96-413, at 247-248 (1980), reprinted in 1980 U.S.C.A.N. 5191-92.

¹³ 36 C.F.R. 13.63(h)

¹⁴ Alternative 3, however, still illegally allows snowmachining in management areas designated as “corridors.”

¹⁵ RDEIS Executive Summary, pg. 4.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Denali National Park and Preserve News Release dated December 11, 2003 (“Snowmobiling for Traditional Activities Currently Available in Some Portions of Denali National Park and Preserve”).

Response to Comments

DCC-14

Two alternatives of the *Revised Draft EIS* plan contained a proposed definition for “traditional activities.” The National Park Service considered public comment favoring adoption of those or similar alternatives as well as the two alternatives that did not include a definition, and chose an alternative that did not include a definition for the preferred alternative. The National Park Service believes that a definition is not required at this time in order to achieve the goals and standards described in the plan, but retains the discretion to define “traditional activities” for the park additions and preserve in the future if it becomes necessary to do so.

Comments

Preserve and then using the lack of a definition for another area to implicitly allow an activity expressly banned by the operative definition is disingenuous at best, and constitutes an arbitrary and capricious decision that is not in accordance with ANILCA. Indeed, the folly of not defining the term was recognized during the promulgation of the final rule banning recreational snowmachines from the Old Park. There the Park Service stated that

*NPS intends to define traditional activities and apply such definitions to other park areas, including the remainder of Denali National Park and Preserve, in subsequent processes, such as future rulemakings to implement backcountry management plans for some of the national parks in Alaska.*¹⁷

The Park Service has proffered no reason why this promise and statutory mandate is only met in two of the non-preferred alternatives.

Even if the Park Service were to justify snowmachining as a “traditional activity” by finding some level of recreational snowmachine use in the Park and Preserve additions prior to the adoption of ANILCA, the Park Service would have to limit snowmachine use to that level and to that area of the Park and Preserve where it occurred. The Park Service, having provided no examples of pre-ANILCA snowmachine use for legitimate “traditional activities” in the Park and Preserve additions can therefore permit no use even if recreational snowmachining was defined as a “traditional activity.” It is unclear how a “large but unquantified expansion of snowmachine use in Denali during the 1990s”¹⁸ can be justified as a “traditional activity” occurring at the time of adoption of ANILCA.

The Park Service has abdicated both its responsibility to manage the Park and Preserve additions under ANILCA’s special access guarantee and its responsibility to undertake and present to the public a detailed analysis of the impacts of activities likely to occur under the Plan. The disingenuous lack of a “traditional activities” definition is a de facto illegal authorization of recreational snowmachining. As promised in 2000, a legally adequate definition of “traditional activities” is required under the Backcountry Management Plan.

15

(2) Impairment

Regardless of the definition of what constitutes a “traditional activity,” it is quite clear that recreational snowmachining causes unacceptable impacts to the ANILCA additions to the Park and Preserve. While the RDEIS provides only a general picture of potential impacts from the alternatives, the description of snowmachine impacts make quite clear that recreational snowmachine use is both incompatible with the purpose of the Park and Preserve and causes unacceptable impacts that rise to the level of illegally impairing Park and Preserve ecological and wilderness resources. .

16

A brief review of the RDEIS description of the general impacts of snowmachining is quite stark. Impacts occur to nearly all resource categories analyzed, including:

- Impacts to wildlife, including behavioral alteration, habitat avoidance (including denning displacement), and increased energy expenditure at critical times when animals are under extreme stress (such as winter, when energy conservation is critical).¹⁹

¹⁷ 65 Fed Reg 37867 (June 19, 2000).

¹⁸ RDEIS, pg. 217.

¹⁹ RDEIS, pg. 257.

Response to Comments

DCC-15

Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences provides in general terms an accurate picture of the type of use likely to take place under the alternatives of the plan, given the limitations of available data, including the type of snowmachine use (see the Assumptions section and discussion under most of the impact topics). See PfP-5 for a discussion of the “traditional activities” definition. There is no requirement for the National Park Service to define “traditional activities” at this time or in this plan.

DCC-16

The use of snowmachines for traditional activities and for subsistence purposes is provided for by statute. The use of snowmachines specifically for recreational purposes is not provided for in the plan. The management area standards and adaptive management framework in the modified preferred alternative would provide the tools necessary to assure that legal use of snowmachines would not impair park resources.

Comments

- Compaction of snow over ice-rich permafrost soils thereby altering snowmelt, increasing soil moisture, reducing the length of the growing season, and lowering soil temperatures beneath the trail and altering physical processes. This includes reducing the suitability of a site for seed germination and spring flower viability as well as increasing surface runoff, reducing infiltration, increasing surface runoff, impeding gas exchange between soil and air, inhibiting root growth, and adversely affecting soil organisms.²⁰
- Direct loss of vegetation through the creation of trails, structural damage to plant tissues, and increased erosion. This leads to change in plant community composition. Indirect effects include changes in the thermal properties of snow from compaction which causes both a reduction in the insulating property of the snow and the lengthening of the duration of snow cover, which, in turn, shortens the growing season for plants.²¹
- Excessive degradation of soundscape through the displacement of ambient natural sound by motorized intrusion.²²
- Degradation of wilderness character through increased encounters with other parties, evidence of modern human use (including the creation of informal trails), and lack of solitude.²³
- Impacts to subsistence resources through interference with traplines, displacement of furbearers, and creation of paths that encourage animals to travel farther from places where subsistence activities generally occur.²⁴
- Impacts to cultural resources as snowmachine use increases and cultural sites are more prone to increased visitation.²⁵

Beyond the resource categories examined by the Park Service, there are other unacceptable impacts from snowmachining. These include emission of airborne toxins including nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, ozone, particulate matter, aldehydes, 1,3 butadiene, benzenes, and extremely persistent polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH). Several of these compounds are listed as “known” or “probable” human carcinogens by EPA. All are believed to cause deleterious health effects in humans and animals well short of fatal doses.²⁶ Toxic raw fuel and air emissions accumulate in the snowpack along rivers, streams and lakes. 80% of the pollutants in the snowpack have been found to be released during the first 20% of snowmelt, and this acid pulse is a major cause of death for aquatic insects and amphibians.²⁷

The Park Service reviews and proposes no real studies on the impacts to the Park’s ecological processes and wilderness resources. For example, “[n]o quantitative studies have been completed on the impacts of snowmachine use on vegetation in the Denali National Park area . . .”²⁸ However, “[v]isual assessments in the Bull River/Foggy Pass area and the Windy-Foggy-Easy Pass area have indicated that broken shrub stems, stripped bark (from abrasion), trail development, and late-melting snow were evident in high-use snowmachine areas.”²⁹ Specific impacts on vegetation, wildlife, air, water, and soil beyond these visual assessments are not evaluated or provided in the RDEIS. Without such an analysis and a finding of no impairment, the Park Service simply cannot permit recreational snowmachining on Park and Preserve additions.

²⁰ RDEIS, pg. 221.

²¹ RDEIS, pg. 232.

²² RDEIS, pg. 286.

²³ RDEIS, pg. 311.

²⁴ RDEIS, pg. 333.

²⁵ RDEIS, pg. 359.

²⁶ Environmental Protection Agency. 1993. Motor Vehicle-Related Air Toxics Study.

²⁷ Rawlins, C.L. 1993. *Sky’s Witness: A Year in the Wind River Range*. Henry Holt and Company, New York.

²⁸ RDEIS, pg. 232.

²⁹ Id.

Response to Comments

DCC-17

The standards contained in the modified preferred alternative are anticipated to accommodate only relatively low levels of snowmachine use in the park additions and preserve. While it is the goal of the National Park Service to reduce anthropogenic emissions wherever feasible within park boundaries, expected ambient concentrations of emissions from projected levels of dispersed snowmachine activity are likely to be below National Ambient Air Quality Standards, and therefore were not addressed in the BCMP. The accumulation of toxic airborne contaminants in the environment from localized as well as international sources is also of concern to the agency. However, there is insufficient data to presume that deleterious levels of contaminants would be released into the ecosystem from anticipated levels of snowmachine use. The National Park Service retains its ability to utilize the tools identified in the Access section of this plan to protect park resources from air pollutants or toxic releases if clear problems were identified.

DCC-18

The National Park Service provided all of the relevant information related to snowmachine impacts to vegetation, wildlife, water, and soil for which definitive information was available and for which NPS resource experts felt the data could support conclusions regarding adverse impacts. The National Park Service does not authorize recreational snowmachining in this plan. Snowmachines access remains allowed “for traditional activities,” travel to and from villages and homesites, and subsistence use as authorized by law. Additional monitoring for vegetation damage would occur as part of plan implementation as described in Table 2-2.

Comments

These problems with both the Park Service's management of Denali and the lack of information provided on the impacts of snowmachining were made quite clear in official comments on the first EIS by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. EPA stated:

*We have focused our review on the potential impact of snowmobile use on the environment at Denali National Park because we believe that snow machine use, among all proposed uses under the Backcountry Management Plan, has the greatest potential to cause significant environmental impacts . . .*³⁰

EPA further admonished the Park Service for the generality of their discussion of snowmachine impacts and suggested that the Park Service

*does not tie these impacts to locations of concern in the Park additions where the most valuable or sensitive resources might be. Thus, the impacts remain largely undefined. The uncertainty raises concerns because this EIS will, for the first time at Denali National Park, result in the establishment of guidelines permitting widespread snowmobile use without a full understanding of the risk to environmental resources within the Park Addition.*³¹

This reservation on the part of EPA is particularly valid for the Bull River-Dunkle Hills area, marked Management Area A in the RDEIS and shot through with three high use corridors. This area is known to have been caribou calving grounds as recently as 1996 and caribou spend time in the Cantwell area during the winter. This general area is known to be valuable moose habitat as well. The preferred alternative and the entire Revised Backcountry Plan in general avoid discussing how impacts to park wildlife will be monitored and mitigated in the higher use areas, Management Area A and Corridors).

The area is, in addition, important for subsistence users. The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission has gone on record as concerned regarding user conflicts with recreational snowmachining

We concur with the EPA, whose comments have not been addressed in the revised DEIS. The Park Service must examine both the park wide and site specific impacts of snowmachining. These will confirm what should realistically be the Park Service's default assumption that snowmachines are now or will in the future impair a variety of Park and Preserve resources.

It is also unclear how the Park Service reconciles the de facto authorization of widespread snowmachine use with the findings of the Final Rule on the closure of the Old Park to recreational snowmachining. There the Park Service stated quite clearly that *"any snowmachine use in the Old Park would be detrimental to the resource values of the area."*³²

Citing the same impacts as presented in this RDEIS, the Park Service concluded that the degradation of wildlife, vegetation, soils, and air and water quality coupled with conflicts between snowmachine use and other recreation and subsistence users, led to a need to ban snowmachine use.³³ A complete reversal in this RDEIS is arbitrary and capricious.

³⁰ RDEIS, pg. 470.

³¹ RDEIS, pg. 471.

³² 65 Fed Reg 37867 (June 19, 2000).

³³ NPS, "Statement of Findings, Permanent Closure," June 2000.

Response to Comments

DCC-19

The modified preferred alternative includes specific direction for monitoring impacts of visitor activity on park wildlife. The management actions described under the Access section of the modified preferred alternative provide management options if monitoring demonstrates a need for action. In addition, the modified preferred alternative has provisions for restricting access if necessary to protect park resources, including wildlife habitat during critical times. For example, if, in the future, caribou crossed into the Dunkle Hills to calve, the National Park Service could temporarily close the Dunkle Hills to all snowmachine access during the calving period, which would provide a reasonable remedy without having to take the more drastic action of closing the entire area to snowmachine access for traditional activities.

DCC-20

The modified preferred alternative is a GMP amendment that addresses management of snowmachine use very broadly. No site-specific proposals were made for snowmachine use or management, so no site-specific impact analysis is necessary or possible. If during implementation there are site-specific measures taken – for example, implementing winter season Corridor management areas that could be used by snowmachines – then site-specific analysis would be appropriate.

Comments

(3) Recreational Opportunities on Surrounding Lands

Finally, the Park Service fails in following their own directive to “define the recreational opportunities of the Denali backcountry and wilderness in the context of a spectrum of recreational opportunities available on public lands in the Denali region.”³⁴ Analysis of snowmobile use on 34.3 million acres of federal and state lands in Southcentral Alaska shows that over 95% of those lands (32.8 million acres) are currently open for snowmachine use.³⁵ It is unclear how the Park Service reconciles the need for increased recreational snowmachine access in the one area managed for “preservation of wilderness character and . . . protecting the park’s intact natural ecosystem”³⁶ which is surrounded by lands managed for multiple use.

Our suggestions regarding snowmachine access are as follows:

12. Promulgate a rule to limit snowmachine access in Denali’s additions by defining traditional activities. This will involve a public process and an open investigation of the intent of ANILCA. It is our firm belief that traditional activities does not include recreation. It is the best course of action.

13. Remove all Corridors from the Final Plan. Most of these were designed with a high encounter rate and high tolerance for natural sound disturbance. In reality, they appear to have been designed to confine snowmachines to high use corridors. However, it is unclear how such corridors can be effectively enforced. Even if recreational snowmachining were authorized somehow, these corridors allow use levels that will impair Denali’s unique resource values and the Wilderness suitability of the lands upon which they are located.

14. Remove the Management A category from the Bull River area in the preferred alternative and replace with Management Area B.

15. Snowmachining, for traditional activities or not, is unsafe on glaciers and should not be allowed there. A high use corridor on the Kanikula Glacier authorized in the preferred alternative should be eliminated from the Final Plan.

Access Management – Airplanes

The use of airplanes as access to wilderness recreation outside the road system for purposes is an established tradition in Alaska and also occurs in Denali Park on various airstrips south of the McKinley massif, for purposes of climbing.

Although Denali Citizens Council supports this concept in general, we oppose general aviation landings in the core Wilderness Park. This is an activity not generally allowed in designated Wilderness and it should not be allowed in Denali.

³⁴ RDEIS, pg. 11.

³⁵ Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1996.

³⁶ RDEIS, pg. 3.

Response to Comments

DCC-21

Corridors are designated for different reasons. On the Tokositna and Kantishna/Muddy Rivers, boat traffic is the primary means of access to the surrounding areas. Although use on the ground in these areas is very dispersed, there is a much higher likelihood of encountering people and watercraft – including motorized watercraft – on the rivers. In Kantishna, the Moose Creek and Skyline routes were formerly constructed to provide mining access. They remain an important means of access for foot traffic and some motor vehicle access by both subsistence users and private inholders during summer months. Again, there is a much higher likelihood of encountering other visitors, motorized equipment, and noise along these routes than in the surrounding area; these are access routes used by visitors before dispersing further into the backcountry. The Corridors in the Dunkle Hills area likewise provide access to the Old Park boundary and lands of the park additions that surround the Corridors. It is intended that these Corridors would be used by nonmotorized users seeking access to the Old Park as well as by subsistence users or others who use snowmachines for traditional activities. These winter-season Corridors would be mapped for users, GPS waypoints would be established, and, if necessary, route markers could be installed. If monitoring reveals that the Corridors are not being used appropriately then additional actions could be taken. The analysis presented in chapter 4 does not conclude that these few Corridors would impair wilderness resource values of the park additions. The National Park Service believes that limits on the levels of use would maintain the suitability of the area for wilderness designation, and the commenter provides no substantiation or standards for concluding otherwise in either case.

DCC-22

In the modified preferred alternative, Management Area A was not removed entirely from the Bull River area, but it was reduced in size to minimize the chance of conflict between subsistence users and other park users. The Bull River rather than Cantwell Creek is now the eastern boundary of this portion of Management Area A.

Comments

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Our suggestions are as follows:

16. We urge NPS to begin the process of closing the Wilderness Core Park to airplane landings, except for emergencies, by closing Wonder Lake to airplane landings.
17. In the ANILCA additions, we do not oppose general aviation or air taxi access, but this access must be limited so as to be in compliance with the *Low* Natural Sound disturbance indicator. We support a system of voluntary reporting for general aviation landings in Denali's additions, and we support mandatory registration for all commercial air taxi landings in the additions and for all backpackers who are delivered to the backcountry in planes. We are open to the concept that during implementation of this plan, NPS may decide to close certain areas of the park additions to general aviation or air taxi landings if conflicts with subsistence use or other user conflicts dictate it.
18. We support mandatory registration for day and overnight hikers in all regions of the park, by whatever mode of access they enter the park. Registration can be done at their point of entry into the park with a few survey questions. This will be necessary to support the VERP process of monitoring indicators and standards for the Management areas.
19. We oppose scenic air tour landings in any of Denali's ANILCA additions. We reluctantly accept scenic air tour landings as an established use on certain glaciers south of Denali, as indicated in Management Area A on the Alternative 3 Map. We agree that air taxi landings to support climbing are a legitimate access, however scenic air tour landings do not constitute what is meant by "wilderness recreation" and therefore are not a legitimate form use of the backcountry of a wilderness park. We urge the NPS to use education, negotiation and collaboration to work with scenic air tour providers to reduce natural sound impairment from all air access activities in the climbing areas of Denali. We oppose scenic air tour landings at the Ramparts, Eldridge Glacier and Little Switzerland. Elsewhere their numbers should be limited and air taxi access given priority if mitigation is necessary.
20. We support continuation of the Aircraft Overflights Working Group for maintaining a collaborative atmosphere and helping to develop voluntary measures and agreements for achieving desired conditions.
21. We support the cap of 1500 climbing permits for Mt. McKinley per year. Since this cap has not been reached, the Final Plan should state that it is not a goal, just a cap, and that numbers can be limited to a lower level if resource impairment dictates. If increased climbing results in increased air taxi access, some scenic landings may have to be reduced or eliminated.

Access – Off road and other vehicles

Recently, a limited finding that ORVs were traditionally employed for subsistence activities in Denali on three drainages was made and awaits implementation through an extended NEPA process. Such use of ATVs is allowed by ANILCA, as long as it does not impair resources. ORVs may be permitted pursuant to Section 1110 (b) of ANILCA for access to inholdings, along designated mining routes. Otherwise the use of ORVs is now and has been continuously illegal on park lands because of inevitable vegetation and soils damage they cause. We support the closure of Denali National Park and Preserve to

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Response to Comments

DCC-23

In the preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS*, Corridors were proposed only to the toes of the Kanikula, Tokositna, and Ruth Glaciers. In the modified preferred alternative, all three of these are eliminated or scaled back, with one optional Corridor extending up the Tokositna and Kanikula Rivers only to the mouth of Wildhorse Creek. The National Park Service agrees that riding snowmachines on glaciers is unsafe and park staff recommend against doing so. However, many backcountry activities carry some inherent risk and that is not a sufficient reason to prohibit them. Climbing Mount McKinley is a clear example of an activity that results in injuries every year and fatalities most years, yet is actually supported by an extensive NPS patrol and search-and-rescue presence.

DCC-24

Regulations implementing ANICLA 1110(a) opened the Old Park to airplane landings although it had previously been closed. The National Park Service recognizes that some parts of the Old Park may be particularly sensitive to airplane landings because of ecological, wildlife, or other resource values or there may be significant visitor safety concerns. The modified preferred alternative has added language indicating that the National Park Service would inventory and evaluate these areas in the Old Park and take action necessary to protect them.

DCC-25

Section 202(3)(a) of ANILCA designates the park additions in part "to protect and interpret the entire mountain massif, and additional scenic mountain peaks and formations." Scenic air tour landings provide the opportunity for the general public to understand the scale of the Alaska Range and the glacier and mountain environment, in a way that is impossible from distant viewing locations. Although opportunities for this activity must be balanced with other uses and purposes, providing some level of opportunity is consistent with the statutory purposes of the park additions. The modified preferred alternative would limit locations for scenic air tour landings and establish natural sound disturbance and other standards that would insure an appropriate balance.

Comments

ORVs except under special conditions and in areas specifically authorized under ANILCA. We also support prohibition of helicopter landings and use of jet skis in Denali National Park and Preserve.

Management Areas – General concerns about Adaptive Management

We applaud the crafters of this RDEIS for their effort to describe various management areas for the backcountry of Denali National Park and Preserve in terms of measurable indicators and standards. This effort represents an attempt to establish desired future conditions for various areas in Denali as a way to protect wilderness character and prevent impairment. Such plans, however, depend upon several elements in order to be successful:

- Adequate **indicators and standards** that cover a range or possible impacts to both the resources themselves and to visitor enjoyment and experience (the VERP Process), and that set conditions that support backcountry values.
- A well funded system of **monitoring**, including park staff who will analyze visitor comments and rangers who will personally monitor the backcountry.
- A well funded **enforcement** plan that provides specific actions that will be taken to reduce or avoid impairment of resources. These actions need not await actual impairment but can be applied if the likelihood of impairment exists.
- A scenario for how the park will be managed in the absence of funding for monitoring and enforcement of plan stipulations.

We feel that the Adaptive Management Plan described in the RDEIS fails to pass the above tests for adequacy. A few reasons are given below:

- Indicators are often quite general and qualitative and developing a valid assessment tool to measure them may be difficult. Example, using terms such as *occasional* or *few* social trails when describing Trail and Campsite Disturbance.
- There are no indicators or standards to describe the impacts of activities allowed under this plan upon wildlife. This is an important consideration, as protection of wildlife is a key value for all planning at Denali.
- Monitoring will be analyzed too infrequently. For encounters, camping density and evidence of modern use, analysis is only every five years by visitor survey.
- There is no evidence that the NPS will be able to afford the infrastructure necessary for monitoring. Several backcountry technicians will be required for the sound monitoring program alone, and also for monitoring the backcountry for the above indicators and standards by rangers. With ongoing budget cuts to NPS, despite strong capital appropriations, manning this monitoring program will not be easy. This problem is especially noteworthy in view of the large jump in cost between Alternative 2 and Alternatives 3 and 4. The more the need for monitoring, the more an absence of funding will hurt the monitoring and enforcement piece of the plan.

Our suggestions are as follows:

22. Add indicators and standards for wildlife health to the final plan, or tie the final plan to resource management activities that will be specifically targeted to measuring impacts of backcountry activities, especially in key areas like the Bull River and Kantishna areas.

23. Reconsider those Indicators and Standards that permit *High* and *Very High* levels of natural sound disturbance, backcountry encounters, camping density, evidence of modern human use, and camping density. These types of standards may be more appropriate, if appropriate at all, for the frontcountry, and may detract from Wilderness suitability for those areas where they are applied.

Response to Comments

DCC-26

The only indicators that are not quantified or quantifiable are those for accessibility and administrative presence. Under “Process for Evaluation” in Table 2-2, there is an indication that the “medium” descriptor for trail and campsite disturbance is intended to match current conditions in the Old Park near the road corridor. Data exist that would be used to establish an objective measure of the degree of trail and campsite disturbance for “medium” and “low” standards, and more information would be gathered during the initial stage of implementation.

DCC-27

The modified preferred alternative contains a commitment to monitor the relationship between visitor use and wildlife population, demographics, and distribution, from which specific indicators and standards would be developed.

DCC-28

In general, the National Park Service believes that the standards described for “medium” or “low” levels of disturbance are most appropriate for areas of the park additions and preserve that are suitable for wilderness designation. There are other purposes for the park unit as well, and some of those are best served by allowing a higher level of use in carefully defined and managed areas. Much as the National Park Service allows a very high number of climbers on the West Buttress route on Mount McKinley – which is in designated wilderness – it makes sense to allow a level of airplane use to accommodate non-mountaineering visitors who wish to experience the mountains and glaciers, or to allow higher levels of use at access points or on designated trails. These carefully defined areas do not compromise the suitability of an area for wilderness designation, but are recognized as exceptions within the normal framework of wilderness management. For all these areas, the higher standards would be approached only during certain seasons, and the landscape would retain the characteristics of wilderness: undeveloped, without permanent improvements or human habitation, preservation of natural condition, generally appearing to be affected primarily by the forces of nature with man’s imprint substantially unnoticeable, and having outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined type of recreation.

Comments

24. Affirm in the final plan that NPS will be monitoring the Backcountry Units in the additions to obtain information on establishment of quotas for overnight use, beginning with those units adjacent to the Kantishna Area additions.
25. Specify in the Final EIS how monitoring activities will take place, how many staff are required, frequency of monitoring and method of analysis. (Example: Perform survey analysis yearly for the first five years. Provide at least two full time field rangers for backcountry patrol and monitoring on the north side and two on the southside (in mountaineering areas at that season, in the backcountry otherwise).
26. Specify in the Final Plan how NPS will protect the park if monitoring and enforcement efforts are not funded. How will NPS prioritize scarce resources? Will the NPS adjust the boundaries or standards for Management Areas? What other techniques may be used?

Management Areas – General Concerns about Monitoring and Mitigation

One of our specific concerns regarding the adaptive management scheme outline for the RDEIS is that there is little in the plan about the specifics of the mitigation and monitoring and enforcement programs. In addition, NPS has a great deal of discretion in the use of tools to enforce those future conditions. We are left in the dark as to how exactly NPS will avoid impairment using the standards and tools listed in the RDEIS. The plan allows that NPS has at least ten identified tools to manage the park, including education, enforcement of existing regulations, voluntary restrictions, registration, commercial management, caps on visitor numbers, temporal restrictions, and closures. Some of the tools would require NEPA compliance and promulgation of new regulations. Some, we are told, will be more useful than others in a specific situation. The only commitment NPS has made is to start with the least restrictive tool appropriate to a particular problem.

We would like to see a more thorough plan for monitoring and mitigation in the Final EIS.

The best discussion of mitigation and monitoring is found in the CEQ's "Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning CEQ's NEPA Regulations."³⁷ Question 34c discusses what provisions should be in the ROD and states that

Lead agencies 'shall include appropriate conditions [including mitigation measures and monitoring and enforcement programs] in grants, permits or other approvals' and shall 'condition funding of actions on mitigation.' Section 1505.3. Any such measures that are adopted must be explained and committed in the ROD. The reasonable alternative mitigation measures and monitoring programs should have been addressed in the draft and final EIS. The discussion of mitigation and monitoring in a Record of Decision must be more detailed than a general statement that mitigation is being required, but not so detailed as to duplicate discussion of mitigation in the EIS. The Record of Decision should contain a concise summary identification of the mitigation measures which the agency has committed itself to adopt. The Record of Decision must also state whether all practicable mitigation measures have been adopted and if not, why not. Section 1505.2(c). The Record of Decision must identify the mitigation measures and monitoring and enforcement programs that have been selected and plainly indicate that they are adopted as part of the agency's decision. If the proposed action is the issuance of a permit or other approval, the specific details of the mitigation measures shall then be included as appropriate conditions in whatever grants, permits, funding or other

³⁷ 46 Fed Reg 18026 (March 23, 2981), as amended, 51 Fed Reg 15618 (April 25, 1986).

Response to Comments

DCC-29

The general monitoring strategy for the various indicators is described in the tables that articulate each standard. More specific protocols would be developed as part of implementation, and details on frequency of monitoring and methods of analysis are best developed in conjunction with that process. The number of staff needed is estimated in the Park Operations and Management section of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences. See also the response to PfP-4.

DCC-30

The National Park Service is responsible for preventing harm to park resources. If inadequate funding compromises the park's ability to know whether harm is occurring, the agency would act proactively to manage visitor use to assure that resources are not impaired. As articulated in chapter 1, the National Park Service need not wait for actual damage to occur before taking protective action to prevent degradation to wildlife and other natural resources. As indicated in the response to PfP-4, one aspect of the plan would be to provide a basis for seeking necessary funding to implement the actions called for by the plan.

DCC-31

See PfP-4.

Comments

approvals are being made by the federal agency. Section 1505.3(a), (b). If the proposal is to be carried out by the federal agency itself, the Record of Decision should delineate the mitigation and monitoring measures in sufficient detail to constitute an enforceable commitment, or incorporate by reference the portions of the EIS that do so.

The responsibility to discuss mitigation measures is found largely in the regulations detailing an appropriate range of alternatives. The alternatives must include “appropriate mitigations measures not already included in the proposed actions or alternatives” (40 CFR 1502.14 (f)) and the discussion of environmental alternatives must include “means to mitigate adverse environmental impacts” (40 CFR 1502.16(h)). Mitigation measures must “cover the range of the impacts of the proposal” and “must be considered even for impacts that by themselves would not be considered ‘significant’” (“Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning CEQ’s NEPA Regulations” Question 19a). These mitigation measures “**must** be developed where it is feasible to do so.” (Id., emphasis added). The CEQ’s Question 19b highlights the importance of the agency discussing mitigation in detail. It states that

[b]ecause the EIS is the most comprehensive environmental document, it is an ideal vehicle in which to lay out not only the full range of environmental impacts but also the full spectrum of appropriate mitigation. However, to ensure that environmental effects of a proposed action are fairly assessed, the probability of the mitigation measures being implemented must also be discussed. Thus the EIS and the Record of Decision should indicate the likelihood that such measures will be adopted or enforced by the responsible agencies. Sections 1502.16(h), 1505.2. If there is a history of nonenforcement or opposition to such measures, the EIS and Record of Decision should acknowledge such opposition or nonenforcement. If the necessary mitigation measures will not be ready for a long period of time, this fact, of course, should also be recognized.”

Final adoption of a concrete mitigation and monitoring plan should be part of the EIS process and should be discussed in the Final EIS so that a finalized plan can be adopted with the Record of Decision. 40 CFR 1505.2(c) discusses the Record of Decision (filed at the conclusion of the EIS decision process) and states that the agency shall

[s]tate whether all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from the alternative selected have been adopted, and if not, why they were not. A monitoring and enforcement program shall be adopted and summarized where applicable for any mitigation.

The Park Service therefore cannot defer the development of monitoring methodologies, but must have a plan ready for implementation with the signing of the ROD.

Management Areas – Specific Concerns

- OP – 1 This classification covers a large part of the Old Park Wilderness and provides for known higher uses that occur adjacent to the park road. It tolerates **Medium** encounters and **Medium** Trail and Campsite disturbance. In general these are acceptable standards. However, when hikers and backpackers get further away from the park road, the expectation should move to lower encounter rates and evidence of trails and campsites.
- OP – 2 Consistent with the type of experience one would expect in the western Old Park, where access is limited by distance from the park road and by high rivers in the summer. To retain the experience here, we have advocated elsewhere for a closure of the Old Park to general aviation landings

Response to Comments

DCC-32

The National Park Service did not identify mitigation measures under any of the alternatives. The NPS considers the plan’s indicators and standards, associated monitoring strategies, and access management tools as alternative actions, not mitigation measures. As a result, the quoted statements from the “Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning CEQ’s National Environmental Policy Act Regulation” do not apply. The Code of Federal Regulations citations referenced by the commenter also do not apply as they pertain to mitigation, and to monitoring that is specifically related to mitigation, but do not apply to monitoring in general.

Comments

- A Tolerates **High** encounter rate and natural sound disturbance along with **Medium** indicators for trail and campsite disturbance, accessibility and administrative presence. This designation is more appropriate for the frontcountry.
- B Acceptable indicators and standards. Suitable for areas with moderately easy access from transportation systems
- C Allows climbing to occur at levels higher than recommended for other types of backcountry recreation, but may be acceptable in view of the choices preferred by climbers. **High** encounter rate is disturbing, but may be acceptable to most climbers. Presence on glaciers has less impact to wildlife.
- D Supports low indicators and standards in all areas, and describes a wilderness backcountry experience.
- E Reserved for very remote sections of the park. **Very Low** encounter rate standard may help to control airplane landings in areas where permitted. We are concerned that the preferred alternative fails to highlight the excellent wilderness qualities of the northern and western park additions by leaving Management Area E entirely out of the alternative.
- Corridors Are inappropriate for wilderness backcountry recreations. Allow **High** natural sound disturbance, **Very High** encounter rate. Their impacts will “bleed out” into surrounding lands.
- Portal Tolerates **Medium** to **Very High** sound disturbance and Medium to high camping density. These exemplify what happens when air access is highly developed and must be avoided in the northern additions and all areas of the backcountry whose future as Wilderness areas is still a possibility.
- Backcountry Hiker This area represents the insertion of the frontcountry into the backcountry, when a trail is built beginning in the road corridor or a developed area defined as frontcountry and extends into the backcountry. **Very High** encounters with people violates management intent of OP 1 lands through which it travels. We favor a no trails policy, unless they are necessary to avoid impacts.
- Mountaineering Special Use Areas These are places where **High** and **Very High** encounter rates and soundscape disturbance can occur. May be acceptable to fly in recreationists and climbers but are not appropriate for NPS backcountry. We may be forced to accept these because of a motivated user group that tolerates the noise.

Our suggestions on Management Areas are as follows:

27. Reduce the amount of Management Area A to a minimum, perhaps leaving only a small area in the climbers region on the south side of Denali. Make the Kantishna Area Management Area B, and the Dunkle Hills Area B. This designation will allow Medium encounters and sound disturbance, which will tend to cap damaging uses earlier.

28. Eliminate high use corridors, which encourage derogation of park resources.

Response to Comments

DCC-33

The modified preferred alternative uses a Management Area D that is a hybrid of Management Areas D and E from the *Revised Draft EIS*, and applies it to much of the northern and western portions of the park additions and preserve. While acknowledging that chance encounters may occur in this area, the general expectation would be that visitors would not encounter other parties.

DCC-34

In response to a broad range of interests in public comment including subsistence users, lodge owners, mountaineers, public interest groups, and others, several management area designations were changed in the modified preferred alternative. The Kantishna Hills were designated as Management Area B, Management Area A in the Dunkle Hills/Broad Pass area was restricted to the west side of the Bull River, and the Coffee and Buckskin Glacier watersheds were switched to Management Area C and B.

Comments

29. Reduce the standard for encounters with people in Backcountry Hiker area to from *Very High to High*, except at the park entrance.

30. Reduce scenic air tour landings at Portals to be consistent with the Alternative 3 map.

31. Designate areas that are more than approx 10 miles from the park road as OP -2, to set a higher wilderness recreation standard for them. This would make the Toklat-Stony flats and the crest of the Alaska Range east of Anderson Pass OP -2.

Soundscape Plan

We applaud NPS efforts to support the preservation of natural sounds in Denali's backcountry by including the health of the natural soundscape among the indicators and standards for this plan. Although the natural soundscape as a resource is relatively new in the park system, it has been well studied at Denali for a number of years now. This RDEIS purports to serve as a Soundscape Preservation and Noise Management Plan as required by NPS Directors Order 47.

We are concerned that the Revised Denali Backcountry Management Plan Preferred Alternative will not carry forth the intent of Director's Order #47 for Soundscape Preservation. The order advocates, "to the fullest extent practicable, the protection, maintenance, or restoration of the natural soundscape resource in a condition unimpaired by inappropriate or excessive noise sources." In addition, DO-47 identifies "the obligation to protect or restore the natural soundscape to the level consistent with park purposes, taking into account other applicable laws." Finally DO-47 states that, "where the soundscape is found to be degraded, the objective is to facilitate and promote progress toward the restoration of the natural soundscape." We argue that certain Management Areas and designations in the Preferred Alternative will allow levels of natural sound disturbance that will impair the natural soundscape. Although these designations may, in some cases, represent actual conditions that are difficult to mitigate (for example, air traffic in the Ruth Amphitheater over several months of the year), in other cases (Corridors), the Preferred Alternative will permit new impairment to occur in the future, in violation of the intent of DO-47.

With regard to specific indicators of impairment, we argue that High and Very High Natural Sound Disturbance, which is a potential standard for Management Area A, Ruth Amphitheater Special Use Area, West Buttress Special Use Area, Corridors and Portals, go against the spirit of DO-47. Although we recognize that there is established seasonal use by aircraft of climbing areas on the south slope of Denali, and that this user group may tolerate the additional soundscape disturbance associated with air access, the acceptance by NPS of increases in this impairment, or even the current level of impairment, is against established policy. See our suggestions under Management Areas, above.

We encourage NPS not to apply management designations that have a high probability of impairing the natural soundscape. It is acceptable, in fact required under DO-47, to give areas with impaired natural soundscapes a management designation that requires mitigation. The effort that such mitigation will trigger, such as consultation with user groups, education and even closures, may take time, but it is effort well taken. If limits on air access to protect the soundscape are required, we suggest that access for climbing has greater historic legitimacy than access for scenic air tours, although even access for climbing may need to be limited.

We argue, finally, that allowing repeated impairment of the natural soundscape in an area will also reduce or eliminate its suitability for Wilderness designation, something NPS has pledged not to do.

Response to Comments

DCC-35

The Backcountry Hiker areas include all existing and planned trails that cross the wilderness boundary in the Old Park as well as those trails to be constructed in the Kantishna Hills. While some of the trails are not likely to exceed the "high" standard for encounters with people, others such as the Savage River trail would likely exceed it regularly. Because trails are only used in limited areas where overuse creates specific resource concerns and because the National Park Service wishes to encourage visitors to remain on the trails where they are provided, the National Park Service concluded that the "very high" standard would be appropriate for Backcountry Hiker areas. However, this standard remains a limit, not a goal, so on most trails visitors would likely encounter many fewer people than allowed by the standard.

DCC-36

The designation of OP-1 for areas of the Old Park distant from the park road but east of the Muddy River is consistent with the encounter rate standard now used to define overnight backcountry quotas in these areas. To change the management area designation to OP-2 would require reducing the overnight backcountry quotas and reducing the level of use that presently could occur. The National Park Service believes these areas are more similar to the rest of OP1 rather than OP2 in terms of the type of backcountry expeditions that could occur, and the agency sees little justification for reducing presently allowed use levels.

DCC-37

The analysis presented in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences demonstrates that the standards proposed in the various management areas would not lead to resource impairment. The standards themselves do not indicate when impairment would occur; they only describe the greatest level of visitor impact that would be allowed. Although these standards represent the most impacts that could occur, they represent a limit – not a goal. The National Park Service would work through the Aircraft Overflights Working Group and other mechanisms to pursue the objective of Director's Order #47 to minimize natural sound disturbance and thereby protect, maintain, and restore the natural soundscape resource.

Comments

Monitoring and Enforcement problems

Although the Plan gives a reasonably complete analysis of the ambient soundscape in Denali on pp 132-138, it does little to describe how it will manage soundscape impairment except by setting desired soundscape conditions for each Management Area, and then stating that one of the tools in the toolkit can and will be used to manage damage soundscape.

The Plan does not state how NPS will mitigate existing damaged soundscapes, although data in the RDEIS indicate that a Medium level of sound disturbance had been experienced by 11 % of park visitors in 2002. However, since NPS has no authority to regulate overflights and other sources of airborne sound disturbance, we acknowledge the understandable difficulty to describe what actions other than consultation and collaboration will be taken.

Cumulative Impacts

DCC and NAEC argue that cumulative impacts from increased snowmachine activity and widespread scenic air tour landings as proposed in alternative 4 make this alternative in violation of the statutory obligation to anticipate and avoid impairment. While NPS may argue that impacts to soundscape are impermanent and seasonal and therefore do not rise to the level of impairment, we disagree. In addition, damage to vegetation, wilderness character and wildlife are inevitable with high encounter rate management designations that include snowmachines. It is the NPS obligation to anticipate and avoid impairment and the preferred alternative does not accomplish this goal. Accepting impairments in parts of the park because “overall” there is minimal impact is inappropriate. Impacts should be mitigated as they occur, and, ideally, prevented.

40

Commercial Services

The Final Backcountry Plan will serve also as a Commercial Services Plan, and on pp. 56 and 57 describes the criteria for allowing commercial uses in Denali National Park and Preserve. We support the allocation between guided hiking-educational programs and independent users in the backcountry of the park, as quoted on page 57.

We are more guarded in our support of the NPS method of prioritization of various guided activities in the park. We agree that Ranger led programs should take precedence in prioritizing available capacity for guided activities. After that the hierarchy becomes more difficult: Murie science and Learning Center Education programs, followed by accredited education and other programs of non profit educational organizations under a cooperative agreement, and finally programs of other entities, including non profits, schools and for profit businesses. It may be difficult to allocate among various commercial organizations, as it will be difficult to show how great the education component is in each one. We acknowledge that this is difficult and urge you to collaborate with various providers to establish a mutual agreement for prioritizing commercial services.

41

Our suggestions:

32. Commercial airplane landings: We support the language of Alternative 3.

33. Guided Hiking: We support the language of Alternative 3 with the following changes- do not form designated campsites in the Kantishna Area, and remove Management Area A designation, replacing it with Management Area B. We guardedly support making the Rock Creek, Roadside, Jonesville, Nenana River and Triple Lakes trails available for

Response to Comments

DCC-38

Director’s Order #47 does not appear to have a requirement to “give areas with impaired natural soundscapes a management designation that requires mitigation.” If the resource were impaired, the National Park Service would have a legal obligation under the Organic Act to remedy the situation. The management actions suggested are within the options available to the National Park Service under the modified preferred alternative to assure natural sound disturbance standards are achieved.

DCC-39

The National Park Service agrees that soundscape degradation contributes to a loss of wilderness character and suitability. Natural sound disturbance was included as a factor in the environmental impact analysis for Wilderness Resources. However, the National Park Service concluded impairment would not occur for either for the natural sound or wilderness resources under the modified preferred alternative.

DCC-40

The comment neither disputes the impairment definition provided in the General Methodology section of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences, nor provides an alternative. Without further information, the National Park Service believes its impairment finding is correct.

DCC-41

The National Park Service agrees with this critique of the hierarchy proposed in the *Revised Draft EIS*. The language has been altered to remove the four-part hierarchy; however, the plan does still make clear that in places where capacity is limited, NPS programs and Murie Science and Learning Center programs would receive first priority. This prioritization is implemented in the eastern portion of the Old Park backcountry, where no off-trail commercial day-hiking services are offered because of an expectation that MSLC programs and NPS Discovery Hikes will utilize available capacity in the near future. Because both of these programs are internally directed by the National Park Service, the agency retains the option to limit these activities in the future if there is a feeling that a commercial guided hiking opportunity would better serve the interests of the public and the park.

Comments

guided hiking as long as some room is left for independent hikers. Otherwise we favor use of entrance area trails by educational programs only.

34. **Sport Hunting:** We support the language of Alternative 3 or 4, whichever is preferred by affected parties.
35. **Other Commercial Activities:** We support the language of Alternative 3. Commercial air taxi services should be subject to consistent monitoring through reporting requirements for the air taxi and for backcountry users transported. The principle would be to manage air access to the additions for wilderness recreational opportunities only, not for scenic landings and to limit their number to correspond to the Low or Very Low encounter rate required by the Management Areas.

Backcountry Facilities

36. **Trails:** We support the no trails policy articulated in Alternative 2, but we must accept the fact that sometimes social trail formation makes trail building necessary to avoid impairment to resources. Trails should not be built in the backcountry for convenience, but only to avoid impairment.
37. **Campsites:** We support Alternative 2, no designated campsites in the park backcountry. We support the preparation of a DCP for Kantishna, in which the purpose of Kantishna can be more thoroughly explored and a thorough vision and development concept plan for the area developed.
38. **Information facilities:** Alternative 2. Authorizing a contact station in the Cantwell/Broad Pass Area is premature. Such development will not require authorization from this plan, if it becomes desirable.
39. **Shelters and cabins:** We could support rest rooms, plug ins and a warming hut at headquarters if needed to support use, but this facility is not needed right now. The new Murie Center is currently serving as a winter contact station and should continue to do so until the need for another facility becomes apparent.
40. **Park Road:** Alternative 3.
41. **Educational Programs:** Alternative 3, with allocations to protect independent users as on page 57 in the RDEIS.
42. **Administrative Camps:** Alternative 3, retain the 14, 000 foot camp on Mt. McKinley.

Easements and Boundary Changes

43. We support an NPS effort to free the stranded access to Denali Park through private land in Cantwell, if it is what the local people want. We are not certain of how much support this proposal has.
44. We support the land exchange on the Tokositna Coffee and Ruth Rivers to realign the boundary to conform to the river and to free up 137 acres of inholdings.

Response to Comments

Comments

In conclusion the Northern Alaska Environmental Center and Denali Citizens Council thank you for your attention to our comments and look forward to continuing our long standing collaboration on the important issues facing Denali National Park and Preserve. These comments reflect a strong attachment to the Vision in Alternative 2 of the RDEIS, with specific comments on individual aspects of the plan that incorporate aspects of Alternative 3 as well. Maps are attached at the end of these comments that provide a more graphic representation of our concerns and suggestions.

We urge you to be proactive in avoiding impacts and to recognize that you are under no obligation to provide opportunities in the backcountry that will degrade the wilderness recreational experience for future generations. If you have any questions regarding specific comments, feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

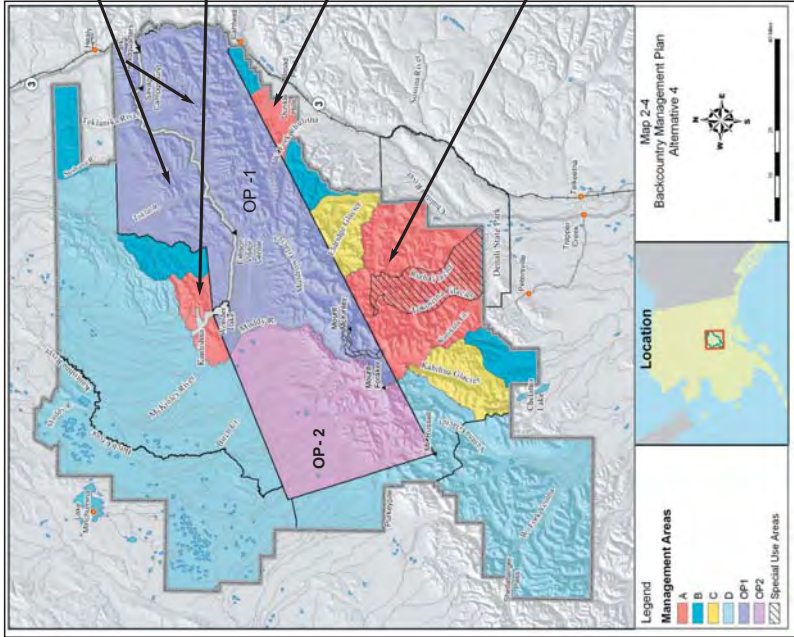
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Response to Comments

NPS Preferred Alternative 4

This alternative contains Management Areas and Corridors that will result in a loss of Wilderness suitability for lands in Denali's ANILCA additions. Standards for higher levels of visitor encounters and noise are too often accepted in this Alternative. The growth of de facto recreational snowmachining is accepted.

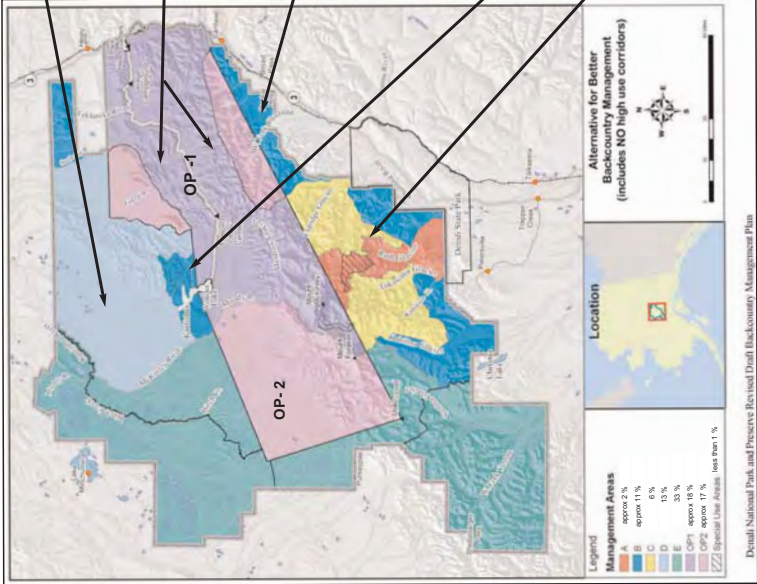


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| Old Park 1 - Preferred Alternative sets too much of the Wilderness Core of the park as OP -1, where higher levels of encounter rates and human disturbance are accepted. Even so, there are selected areas under flightseeing corridors where OP - 1 standards are likely exceeded. The final plan should identify these areas and propose mitigation activities. | Kantishna - Kantishna is developed, but hotel guests there should expect a backcountry experience more like OP - 1 than Management Area A. The Kantishna experience should not be allowed to become an urban experience. Park management of Kantishna should reflect overall park policy of maintaining the northern additions in pristine condition, and overall park policy opposed to northern access with Kantishna as a terminus. | Management Area A - Allows high levels of human encounters and high levels of sound disturbance, both of which will impair Wilderness suitability. In addition, this area is sensitive caribou habitat. Conflicts with subsistence users may occur. Where conflict occurs, subsistence has been recognized as a priority use. High use corridors should be eliminated in this area and all areas. | Management Area B - This is an area of heavy mountaineering and scenic flight use. The Management Area A allows too much scenic landing and too high a level of sound disturbance. It needs to be decreased in size. In addition, the High sound tolerance abutting the entire border with Denali State Park commits that state park to potential damage inconsistent with its mission. | Indicators, Standards and Monitoring 1. It is appropriate to apply tighter standards and management designations to areas where current impairment already suggests mitigation. This is a far better strategy than accepting damaging uses by designating damaged areas for current conditions. 2. The Final Plan should lay out more monitoring and mitigation specifics and also provide a realistic cost analysis. 3. The Final Plan should detail a strategy, with priorities, for monitoring and enforcement if funding is reduced or unavailable. |
|--|---|--|--|---|

Response to Comments

A New Map for Better Management

This map carries forward the vision of Alternative 2, to protect a unique backcountry experience. Visitors with a short time frame or who require assistance would more likely complete their visit in the frontcountry of the park. This map is predicated upon adequate funds for monitoring and enforcement and upon active protection for park wildlife and physical resources.



Northern Additions - Management Areas in the northern additions would carry with them indicators and standards that will preserve wilderness character, an established priority for these areas. Commercial aircraft landings for access to wilderness recreation could be allowed, subject to commercial use authorization and limits to meet standards and conditions.

Old Park 1 - Preferred Alternative sets too much of the Wilderness Core of the park as OP -1, where higher levels of encounter rates and human disturbance are accepted. Upper reaches of the Alaska Range and much of the Toklat Basin are sensitive habitat and should be designated OP-2, whose standards will result in fewer adverse impacts to park resources.

Dunkle Hills-Bull River - Has high likelihood of user conflicts between snowmachine use, subsistence use and wildlife values. Designation as Area B will reduce potential impacts by triggering action sooner. NPS should define traditional activities to exclude recreational snowmachining from the park additions.

Kantishna - Designation as Management Area B provides for an experience similar to that in OP-1. Areas closer to the park road, Kantishna airstrip, skyline drive, and private inholdings would have greater encounter rates. However, the federal lands surrounding these inholdings should be kept to a tighter standard in order to offer a wilderness recreation experience to Kantishna guests. Kantishna would not be targeted for designated campsites and high use corridors by this plan, but local stakeholders and the public would have the opportunity to craft a plan for the area within the next 3 years.

Management Area A - Although the indicators and standards for Management Area A tend to cause impairment of natural soundscape and opportunities for solitude, this map minimizes the size of Area A, and does so only in an area of the park with established access by aircraft and a population of climbers who, we are told, are tolerant of the additional noise and crowding. This map minimizes opportunities for scenic air tour landings while maintaining opportunities for access to climbing. Some mitigation could be required. It is a compromise.

Comments

Response to Comments

Comments

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July 11, 2005

Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

RE: Comments on Draft Backcountry Management Plan

Dear Mr. Anderson:

The International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association ("ISMA") has reviewed the Denali National Park and Preserve Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan ("Proposal"). While ISMA commends the National Park Service's ("NPS") efforts to establish a plan to manage recreational uses within Denali National Park and Preserve ("Park"), ISMA is deeply concerned with several aspects of the Proposal. The clear intention to manage the Denali Addition lands as a Wilderness Area is contrary to law and sets the stage for unnecessary and improper limitations or prohibitions on motorized access, especially snowmachines, to these lands. ISMA submits the following comments regarding these concerns.

Access

1. ANILCA

As you know, management of and access to all conservation system units ("CSUs") in Alaska are governed by the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act ("ANILCA"). *Pub.L. 96-487*. Specifically, section 1110(a) of ANILCA guarantees the use of snowmachines (when there is adequate snow cover) to access CSU's for "traditional activities." § 1110(a). Such access is subject only to "reasonable regulations by the Secretary to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units . . . and *shall not be prohibited unless, after notice and hearing in the vicinity of the affected unit or area, the Secretary finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area.* *Id.* (emphasis added).

Among the reasons NPS identifies for developing a new backcountry management plan is that the former backcountry planning document predated ANILCA and did not apply to the lands added to the Park and Preserve by ANILCA. *Proposal at 5*. NPS further recognizes that

Response to Comments

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ANILCA “created legal mandates for special access that have never been addressed in backcountry planning.” *Id.* However, in describing the other reasons for establishing the Proposal (i.e., increased visitation, new uses, and resource protection based on increased visitation and use), it quickly becomes clear that the latter reasons improperly swallow the first.

For instance, NPS indicates that, in addition to applying ANILCA to backcountry management, the Proposal also is needed to address increased visitation for backcountry use, including snowmachine use, and anticipated increases in other activities. *Id. at 6.* Specifically, the Proposal states that while snowmachines “can be an important means to access remote backcountry areas; [] conflicts with other users, especially non-motorized winter recreationists and subsistence users, are increasing, and concerns have been raised about the effects of snowmachine use on wildlife, vegetation, water quality, air quality, and natural soundscapes, and other park resources.” *Id. at 7.* Additionally, NPS states that the Proposal is needed to ensure that certain resources values, such as “wildlife, vegetation, natural ecological relationships, natural sounds, and wilderness resource values” are not compromised. *Id.*

First, NPS fails to quantify either the conflict among users or the alleged impacts on the identified resources or “values.” Despite the fact that each alternative would severely curtail ANILCA’s access guarantee for snowmachines, the Proposal is essentially void of any studies, data, or information to establish the need for such use restrictions. Such a change in longstanding management policy without sufficient explanation and substantiation is arbitrary and capricious agency action.

Second, while ISMA supports NPS’s efforts to manage backcountry activities to protect “resources” related to subsistence needs and to preserve “resources” such as lands, waters, wildlife populations and wildlife habitat, as directed under ANILCA, ISMA objects to any implication that Congress directed NPS to manage the Denali Addition land to preserve subjective amenity “values” such as “natural sounds” or unspecified “wilderness resource values.” *See Id. at 8, 212.* Similarly, ISMA objects to NPS’s use of “social conditions” as an indicator to gauge the visitor experience and resource conditions in the Park. *Id. at 40.* ANILCA does not authorize NPS to manage section 1110(c) access for social (non-resource) purposes.

Notably, none of the Denali Addition lands have been designated as Wilderness by Congress. In fact, ANILCA clearly provides the Addition lands are not to be managed as Wilderness areas until Congress specifically designates them as part of the Wilderness System. § 1317(c). Nonetheless, the Proposal provides that all backcountry areas would be managed as if it were a designated Wilderness area (i.e., managed to leave “the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable” and to provide “opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation”). *Proposal at 53-56.* NPS must clarify that the Denali Addition lands are not to be managed as Wilderness and that aesthetic and social values that may be

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ISMA-1

The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission has identified conflicts between recreational snowmachine users and subsistence users on many occasions, and the minutes of several specific meetings are referenced in the Subsistence Resources and Opportunities analysis of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences (e.g., page 346 of the *Revised Draft EIS*). Some plan actions, particularly the management area designations in the Broad Pass area, were developed to respond to this documented conflict. Conflicts with other non-motorized recreational users were identified anecdotally during plan scoping and verified by public comment on the *Draft EIS*. However, although conflicts with these users remains an identified concern under the project’s purpose and need, no proposals in the modified preferred alternative were developed specifically to alleviate this conflict. Instead, the management framework developed is intended primarily to safeguard the park’s resources and values. Contrary to the assertion of the letter that the plan is “void” of studies that establish a need for management, several sections of chapter 4: Environmental Consequences clearly describe and document the potential adverse impacts of snowmachine use, including sections on ice-rich permafrost soils, vegetation, wildlife, and natural sounds. Finally, the modified preferred alternative does not propose any immediate restrictions on snowmachine use, but sets up an adaptive management framework for monitoring visitor use impacts and responding appropriately.

ISMA-2

The National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 directs the National Park Service to consider carrying capacity as part of a general management plan or amendment. The National Park Service recommends establishing carrying capacity through the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) process, which calls for defining desired future conditions that are expressed through indicators and objective standards that can reasonably be measured over time. These indicators and standards should be chosen to gauge as accurately as possible changes in the resources of the park unit. ANILCA specified that a purpose of the act was to “preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities” on the public lands designated under the act (ANILCA Sec. 101(b)), and specifically for the Denali additions to provide “continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering and other wilderness recreational activities” (ANILCA Sec. 202(3)(a)). ANILCA furthermore states that the term “wilderness” is defined the same as in the Wilderness Act (ANILCA Sec. 102(13)). Since the Wilderness Act defines “wilderness” partly through

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determinative in management of Wilderness areas do not carry similar force and effect in the Denali Addition lands.

In sum, this issue does not boil down to the usual philosophical debate between preservation of resources versus use of and access to resources. Here, NPS is trying to extend its discretion to limit use and access of resources beyond that authorized by law based on purported impacts to subjective aesthetic values including some non-users' enjoyment in 'just knowing the Park is there.' Such subjective perceptions certainly were not intended to constitute a "resource value" under Section 1110(a) of ANILCA. Rather, ANILCA expressly provides that snowmachine access is guaranteed and "shall not be prohibited unless . . . the Secretary finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area." ANILCA simply does not identify aesthetic or social values as a "resource value," for purposes of Section 1110(a). Therefore, transmitting the aesthetic and social values of some users into tangible "resources" flatly violates Section 1110(a).

2. "Traditional Activities"

Another potential tool that could be extrapolated from the Proposal to undermine ANILCA's access guarantee is the agency's definition of "traditional activity." Section 1110(a) guarantees the use of snowmachines (when there is adequate snow cover) to access CSU's for "traditional activities." § 1110(a). Since ANILCA's enactment in 1980, "traditional activities" have been generally understood to include fishing, hunting, sightseeing, camping, picnicking, photography, etc. This range of bona fide traditional activities occurred throughout the Denali Addition lands before ANILCA and has continued during the intervening 24 years. Moreover, this range of activities is recognized as "traditional" on millions of acres of other NPS lands in Alaska as well as wildlife Refuges, Monuments, and Wilderness areas managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service.

When these activities were permissible in the Park, individuals were afforded by law the right to use snowmachines, airplanes, and motorboats to access the Park in order to engage in these "traditional activities." Unfortunately, the former Clinton Administration upset this longstanding practice by redefining "traditional activities" in the pre-ANILCA lands to exclude camping, sightseeing, photography, picnicking, and other similar activities in order to force through the 2000 snowmachine closure for the 1.9 million acres of "Old Park."

Now the NPS is proposing to extend this ill-conceived and incorrect definition of "traditional activity" to the Denali Addition lands. *Proposal at 61, 187.* As stated in the Proposal, the effect of applying this definition "would be to close the park and preserve to recreational snowmachine use", with few exceptions. *Plan at 66.* Thus, the only conceivable reason to continue to apply the irrational definition of "traditional activities" is to press another attack on Section 1110(a)'s access guarantee. ISMA strongly encourages the agency to revise

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"social conditions" – e.g. opportunities for solitude – it is appropriate that the Denali BCMP would include indicators and standards for these conditions.

In addition, it is important in implementing the VERP process to choose indicators to "indicate" the condition of multiple resources. For example, the number of encounters with people in the backcountry not only helps to indicate the degree of wilderness solitude to be expected in an area, but is also correlated with use density, which in turn affects many other variables, such as the likelihood of seeing wildlife and potential impacts to vegetation.

Natural sound is not an "amenity" value but a physical, measurable resource that has implications for wilderness resource values, biological values, and visitor experience.

ANILCA does not have a section 1110(c).

ISMA-3

The BCMP does not commit the National Park Service to manage the Denali park additions "as wilderness." However, it does place an emphasis on protecting "wilderness resource values" and "wilderness recreational activities" as prescribed by ANILCA. ANILCA Section 1317(c) does not preclude the NPS from doing so (see SOA-1).

ISMA-4

Based on the extensive public scoping process conducted for this plan and analysis of ANILCA legislative history, the NPS disagrees that "traditional activities" have been "generally understood" to include the activities listed. In fact, disagreement over the definition of "traditional activities" – and thus the extent of snowmachine access protected by ANILCA 1110(a) law and regulation – remains one of the major unresolved issues of ANILCA. Contrary to the assertion in the letter, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has not defined "traditional activities" on any of its lands in Alaska, and the National Park Service has in regulation only the definition for the former Mount McKinley National Park, which includes only consumptive activities that are part of a traditional Alaskan lifestyle, not sightseeing, picnicking, photography, or other purely recreational activities. The 1979 Senate Report on ANILCA also did not refer to sightseeing and photography and explained that the Energy Committee understood that section 1110(a) provided Special Access for "...sport hunting, fishing, berry-picking and travel between villages" (p. 247-248).

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this definition in order to encompass the actual, longstanding meaning of “traditional” activities, which includes activities such as sightseeing and picnicking that have been occurring in the Park for decades.

To ensure that ANILCA’s access guarantee is properly applied and an appropriate level of access by snowmachine is maintained, ISMA supports and encourages NPS to stand by its proposal to apply a hierarchy of tools beginning with the least restrictive means to reasonably regulate guaranteed access. *Proposal at 50-51*. Additionally, as an overarching measure, ISMA recommends that NPS also update its Management Policies to reflect a similar hierarchical structure as well as a management approach that more appropriately implements NPS’s Organic Act mandates.

Current NPS Management Policies referred to throughout the Proposal are contrary to applicable law and, therefore, NPS should not base its backcountry management plan on these flawed policies. For instance, ANILCA expressly provides that the Denali Addition lands are not to be managed as Wilderness areas until Congress specifically designates them as part of the Wilderness System. § 1317(c). However, in the Proposal, NPS improperly relies on NPS Management Policies that “direct the NPS to ‘take no action that would diminish the wilderness suitability of an area possessing wilderness characteristics until the legislative process of wilderness designation has been completed.’” *Proposal at 309*. As a result, the Proposal provides that all backcountry areas would be managed as if it were a designated Wilderness area. *Proposal at 53-56, 309*. NPS relies primarily on a document entitled “Wilderness Management” to examine the recreational opportunities at Denali (Old Park and Additions). *Proposal at 384*. NPS should revise the Management Policies to rectify this and other inconsistencies between the applicable laws and NPS Management Policies. We note that under federal administrative law agency policies cannot be used to trump statutes.

Alternatives

ISMA agrees with NPS’s efforts to provide a revised backcountry management plan for Denali National Park and, therefore, does not support Alternative 1, the no action alternative. ISMA also does not support Alternatives 2-4 because they essentially require the majority of Denali’s backcountry to be managed as a Wilderness area, which it is not. Even the preferred alternative, Alternative 4, which boasts “opportunities for a variety of wilderness recreational activities and experiences” (*Proposal at 70*), eviscerates ANILCA’s access guarantee by limiting snowmachine access in the Addition lands to a crabbed definition of “traditional activities.” As indicated above, when explaining the use of “traditional activities”, the Proposal states that the effect of applying this definition “would be to close the park and preserve to recreational snowmachine use”, with few exceptions. *Proposal at 66*. Clearly, Alternative 4 would have a similar effect.

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ISMA-5

The preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* and the modified preferred alternative of the *Final EIS* do not propose to extend the Old Park definition of “traditional activities” to the Denali additions.

ISMA-6

Updating NPS Management Policies is beyond the scope of the backcountry management plan.

ISMA-7

The National Park Service disagrees that NPS Management Policies are contrary to law and therefore not applicable to the management of Denali. As described above, the decision to manage the Denali backcountry to protect wilderness values and wilderness recreational activities – using the Wilderness Act definition of “wilderness” – comes primarily from ANILCA itself. This direction is supported by overwhelming public interest as reflected in scoping comments and comments on both the original and revised draft plans. It is also influenced by the history and tradition of this particular park unit, as articulated in the Wilderness section of Chapter 3: Affected Environment. Finally, the direction is supported by and consistent with NPS Management Policies, but they are not the only or even the most important reason for the management actions in the Final BCMP. See also SOA-1.

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Out of the five alternatives, ISMA believes Alternative 5 provides the most appropriate measures to manage backcountry recreational activities. Alternative 5 essentially splits the Park and the Addition lands to provide one large area of highly dispersed, self-reliant travel and another large segment to provide continued opportunities for greater intensity and high volume use. Alternative 5 also provides the greatest socio-economic benefits to the communities surrounding Denali National Park and Preserve.

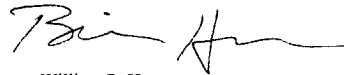
However, even Alternative 5 proposes to apply the inappropriate definition of "tradition activities" as applied for use in the Old Park. ISMA strongly opposes NPS's application of this definition as contrary to ANILCA § 1110(a).

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide comments on the Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan. ISMA is persuaded that if NPS revises its Management Policies and appropriately applies the hierarchy of management tools identified in the Proposal the 5.6 million acres of the Park may be managed to accommodate ANILCA's access guarantee and provide opportunities for visitors to engage in various backcountry activities, while also conserving the Park resources.

Sincerely,

BIRCH, HORTON, BITTNER
AND CHEROT



William P. Horn

cc: Drue Pearce
Cam Toohey
The Honorable Ted Stevens
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
The Honorable Don Young

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National Parks Conservation Association
750 W. 2nd Ave. #205 Anchorage, AK 99501

15 July 2005

Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Dear Superintendent Anderson,

Denali National Park and Preserve is one of the premier wilderness national parks in America. Established in 1917, the original Mt. McKinley National Park encompassed about two million acres and, in 1980 with the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, it was expanded to six million acres and renamed Denali National Park & Preserve. It is unsurpassed by any other park in the system for supporting fully functional ecosystems while providing the opportunity for hundreds of thousands of visitors every year to experience Alaska's wildlife and wilderness.

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) has reviewed the Denali National Park & Preserve Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan Environmental Impact Statement (Revised Draft) and offers the following comments. NPCA is America's only private nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated solely to protecting, preserving, and enhancing the U.S. National Park System. Founded in 1919, NPCA has more than 300,000 members of which 1,000 reside in Alaska.

Consistent with the first draft, the Revised Draft's goal is to "provide future generations with a variety of opportunities to experience the park backcountry while protecting park wildlife and other natural resources, wilderness values, and subsistence uses," (page 1) and that this amendment to the Park's General Management Plan "does not change the fundamental purposes of the park as established in law and policy. Throughout the history of the park, management decisions have been oriented to the preservation of the intangible values of wilderness." (Page 3)

In reading the Purpose and Need (Chapter One of the Denali Backcountry Revised Draft Management Plan), there is no doubt that the Park Service is fully aware of its legal obligation to protect and perpetuate wilderness and other park resources, and that the Park Service is committed to selecting a management regime that does not impair park

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values or negatively impact park resources, including wilderness, solitude, and soundscape. The Purpose and Need section has been improved from the original draft by recognizing and emphasizing the importance of intangible values such as the ability to experience solitude in an untrammelled landscape where the sounds of nature predominate. We are further pleased to see that the revisions recognize that this plan “will seek to provide recreational opportunities in the Denali Backcountry that are compatible with the unique resources and values for which the park was established” (page 11). And that “Other recreational activities can occur on adjacent public lands that possess excellent wildland qualities but also have broader management mandates that are more appropriate for some uses” (page 11).

Denali is different than other public lands in the region. Denali was established and expanded by ANILCA with authorizing language that clearly states that the purpose of national parks in Alaska includes “preserve unrivaled scenic and geological values,” “maintain sound populations, and habitat for, wildlife species,” “preserve extensive, unaltered ecosystems,” “protect resources related to subsistence needs,” and “preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities such as hiking, canoeing, fishing, and sport hunting.” The Revised Draft is specific in its recognition that protecting wildlife, soundscape, wilderness, and subsistence values are the primary guiding principles at Denali for this and future management plans. The revised draft includes important language about NPS management policies and reminds us that “the impairment of park resources and values may not be allowed unless directly and specifically provided by statute.” (page 14) What is unclear is why the Park Service, in clear contradiction to the direction provided in ANILCA, prefers an alternative that causes some degree of impact or possibly impairment, for almost all proposed management actions.

For while the Park Service has demonstrated an understanding of its obligation to manage the park so as to not impair the park’s resources and to support a wide range of park values, including soundscape, solitude and wilderness, there is a disconnect between the recognized need to protect the park’s resources and the plan’s proposed preferred alternative (Alternative 4). NPCA recognizes the very same need to not impair park resources and to support a wide spectrum of park values and, as such, we helped develop and support the People for Parks Alternative. The People for Parks Alternative provides a better future for Denali by blending parts of the preferred alternative with parts of alternatives #2 and #3, both of which, we feel, are more environmentally preferred and provide a higher level of protection for park values and resources.

Summary Position

In support of the need to provide maximum protection for the parks resources, NPCA urges the Park Service to:

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1. **Adoption of the People for Parks Alternative** - By selecting parts of alternatives #2, #3, and #4, this improves the plan's management direction for both resource protection and visitor experience and does a better job of providing for a better future for Denali.
2. **Use the Precautionary Principle** – The National Park Service Organic Act directs parks to be managed so that the scenery, natural and historic objects and wildlife are left “*unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.*” This plan's style of management based on “desired future conditions” may sometimes delay action until after damage occurs. In order to fulfill the congressional mandate of the Organic Act, this plan needs strengthening to give park managers the authority to act easily and decisively before park resources are impacted, not after.
3. **Emphasis on a Quality Visitor Experience** – We support and endorse the plan's emphasis on intangible values such as the ability to experience solitude in an untrammelled landscape where the sounds of nature predominate. These values are necessary to preserve Denali's wilderness character for future generations of backcountry users. It is the Park Service's responsibility to manage the park for these values.
4. **Determine Funding and Details for Monitoring Program First** - Before implementing this plan, it is imperative NPS has a detailed and fully funded monitoring program developed with public involvement. This plan also needs to detail how NPS will monitor and enforce the stipulations of this plan if little or no additional funding is made available. We assume much of this needed monitoring information will be in the Record of Decision and we look forward to working with NPS on this critically important part of this process.
5. **Adopt the Old Park regulation for Traditional Activities** – Only two of the alternatives define traditional activities and one of those does so in a manner that still provides for recreational snowmobiling. NPCA continues to be perplexed about how NPS can implement ANILCA Section 1110(a) in the park's 1980 additions without defining traditional activities. The de facto result is allowing recreational snowmobiling, which NPCA strongly feels was not what Congress intended when they passed ANILCA. Recreational snowmobiling is illegal in Denali, damages park resources, and must not be authorized in this plan. To accomplish this the definition for traditional activities currently in use for the Old Park needs to be extended to the 1980 Park Additions and Preserve.
6. **Protect Denali's Soundscape From Impairment** - We are extremely concerned with the high levels of noise allowed in Management Area A, Portals, Corridors, West Buttress Special Use Area, Major Landing Areas, and the Ruth Glacier Special Use Area. We feel the standards of audible motorized noise of 25%-50% of any hour are way beyond reasonable impacts for backcountry areas of a wilderness park. In fact, we believe levels of 50% easily exceed the threshold to be considered impairment. We request both the standards for High and Very High either be completely removed or lowered considerably in the final plan.

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7. **Complete the Wilderness Recommendation** - As required by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) the Park Service conducted a wilderness review in 1988 and concluded that approximately 3.73 million additional acres were suitable to be designated as Wilderness. NPS must fulfill its ANILCA obligation to complete the process by having the President forward its recommendation to Congress. In the meantime, NPS can take no action to either diminish the wilderness suitability of the area or reduce the probability of a wilderness designation.

Specific Comments On Revised Draft Plan

The premise of this plan, whose proper implementation is potentially impacted by the real world of 21st Century public land politics, does contain a certain logic. The Park Service identifies Desired Future Conditions for park resources (including values such as solitude and sound), sets standards and indicators that will tell us when those Desired Future Conditions are being exceeded, establishes a monitoring program to tell us when and if Desired Future Conditions are being negatively impacted by human activity, provides for a “toolbox” of actions should those Desired Future Conditions be impacted, and allows for changes in those Desired Future Conditions when new information is made available. This process should work well in the abstract. However, the reality of its application causes us great concern.

Park Service Must Retain Its Discretion to Prevent Impairment - Against this proposed management strategy, one must remember the Organic Act and the fundamental principles established for not only Denali, but all national parks. Pursuant to its Organic Act, the Park Service must manage Denali National Park and Preserve so as to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them *unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.*” (emphasis added). This preservation mandate is further enforced by the Redwood Act amendments to the Organic Act, which state “The authorization of activities shall be construed and the protection, management, and *administration of these areas shall be conducted in light of the high public value and integrity of the National Park System* and shall not be exercised in derogation of the values and purposes for which these various areas have been established, except as may have been or shall be directly and specifically provided for by Congress.”

Nothing in the Alaska Lands Act diminishes these clear directives. In implementing this Desired Future Conditions management approach, the Park Service must recognize that while it may have the discretion to choose the most appropriate tool or mechanism to achieve its desired future resource and social conditions for a particular area, it must adhere to its Congressionally mandated duty to manage the park in a way that ensures its scenery, natural and historic objects, and wildlife will be preserved and left *unimpaired*

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for the enjoyment of future generations. In other words, park managers must act to *prevent* impairment of park resources.

With this reminder of how parks are to be managed, we feel this proposed approach, if not properly implemented with full funding, will lead to impairment of park resources by providing too much flexibility to political influences that would question identified impacts with a desire for “more study” and would weaken or postpone management actions necessary to protect impacted resources. Critical to this whole management approach is timely identification of real, possible, probable, or potential changes or impacts to Desired Future Conditions so that clear and decisive management action can be taken in a timely manner so as to protect park resources. Park Superintendents must be given the authority to take action when they see or anticipate a problem.

Allowing the Superintendent to take action based on what he/she sees or anticipates as impacts to Desired Future Conditions is critical to the success of this management approach. The plan must be clear that both the authority to monitor and the authority to take action lies with the Superintendent. The plan must be clear that if a Superintendent anticipates that an action could or will cause impairment, they are empowered to act BEFORE damage occurs to control or restrict a harmful recreational activity. Anticipating and preventing damage to park resources is more important than reacting to an impact once it starts to occur. The Superintendent must be able to take action as he/she sees fit to respond to actions that are impacting park resources or that COULD impair park resources. Should there be any question of the impact level, the plan must also provide the Superintendent with the direction to err on the side of caution.

Unlike much of the world, Denali National Park and Preserve sustains a vast functioning ecosystem. That ecosystem functions because of 89 years of strict protective measures taken by the National Park Service. Ecosystems can be significantly modified by human actions, often to the detriment of that ecosystem’s sustainability. The cost of rebuilding or rehabilitating an impacted ecosystem is oftentimes staggering. At Denali we have done it right the first time, so far. Aldo Leopold said that the first rule of tinkering is not to throw away all the pieces. Since we have the pieces at Denali to sustain and perpetuate that functioning ecosystem, then Superintendent must be given the authority to err on the side of conservation. If he/she later finds that a rule, regulation, or emergency order was too strict, it can be loosened. If it is virtually impossible to take an action that is too permissive, and damaging to the resource, and tighten it up. Caution is the key word and the plan must be explicit in its direction to embrace the precautionary principle.

React Decisively to Resource Threats – In Actions Common to all alternatives, general guidance for Access does not give the superintendent the necessary authority to react to real or potential threats to park resources. Direction is given on page 50 that the Park Service “would use the least restrictive mechanism or ‘tool’ necessary to accomplish the goal” and “The park superintendent is free to pick whichever tool is required so long as the ‘least restrictive’ criterion is heeded.” Forcing a park manager to use the least restrictive tool would seem to prevent that manager from exercising the precautionary

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NPCA-1

Case law is cited in Chapter 1: Purpose and Need, which demonstrates that the National Park Service has legal authority to act before actual damage occurs to park resources. Text in the “general guidance” of the Access section in the modified preferred alternative has been clarified to indicate the responsibility of the National Park Service to act before standards are exceeded.

NPCA-2

The guidance in the Access section of the modified preferred alternative is clear that the superintendent is not obligated to pick the least restrictive management tool, but the least restrictive management tool that would work to accomplish the goal. Specifically the text reads, “If it becomes necessary to manage travel in any area to achieve desired future resource and social conditions for an area, to reduce visitor conflict, or to protect visitor safety, the National Park Service would use the least restrictive mechanism or ‘tool’ necessary to accomplish the goal.” This language provides the National Park Service great flexibility in managing access to insure that desired future conditions are achieved.

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principle and prevent him/her from taking action using the mechanism or 'tool' that would clearly and without a doubt stop resource damage. That tool may not always be the least restrictive. Least restrictive implies a decision that should work, not one that will definitely work. Preventing resource damage should be the primary function of this plan, yet constricting the range of mechanisms or 'tools' a superintendent can use to that which is the least restrictive handicaps a park manager that wants to exercise caution.

Furthermore, that section says that "restrictions and closure would be accomplished consistent with the process outlined in 43 CFR 36.11..." It must be made clear that 36.11 only applies to Title XI/traditional activity closures. At the persistent insistent of the state, the public is being trained to believe that all access in parks for any purpose fits under a traditional activity definition and therefore is under Title XI rules. The access guaranteed under Title XI is not for all access, otherwise why would Congress have made a special exemption? This persistent confusion is another example of the need to define traditional activities so the public will know what is covered by Title XI and what is covered by "other relevant regulations."

Improving the Monitoring Program - As the Superintendent monitors the Desired Future Conditions, there must be clear standards and indicators for when those conditions are met or exceeded. Key to monitoring these standards and identifying any changes in the indicators is a solid understanding and documentation of existing conditions and, better yet, conditions as they were when ANILCA passed. The discussion of standards and monitoring in the Actions Common section reference "existing data." A summary of existing data should be in this plan. We find it difficult to determine if we can endorse or support the standards established in the plan without any data showing how these proposed standards relate to what is actually happening on the ground right now or, better yet, during the time since ANILCA passed. There very much needs to be baseline data against which to measure the efficacy of these proposed standards. We are concerned that the extent of existing baseline data is not sufficient to support a monitoring program that can withstand scrutiny from those that will oppose any restrictions or closures. Besides soundscape, are there other areas where existing conditions already exceed the standards?

The methodology for measuring change over time for those standards that include encounters with people or human disturbance relies on a visitor survey conducted every five years. Where did five years come from? That seems too long a time period. There can be significant shifts in recreational visitation, with resulting potential impacts to park resources, in only one year (12.3% increase from 2003 to 2004), what could happen if there was this much increase in each of five years without any monitoring by NPS? Backcountry camping has changed as much as 25% (1993 to 1994) in one year, though shifts in the 10%/year range are more common. Still, if we increased 10%/year over 5 years, NPS would be looking at a 50% increase.

As the visitor survey seems to be the primary tool by which you are basing your monitoring plan, we suggest that all survey data collection be done on an annual basis for

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NPCA-3

The National Park Service agrees that the process for closures or restrictions in 43 CFR 36.11 only applies to the "special access" provisions of ANILCA 1110(a). The modified preferred alternative accurately states, "Restrictions and closures would be accomplished consistent with the process outlined in 43 CFR 36.11 and/or other relevant regulations."

NPCA-4

All available data is presented or referenced in the plan in chapters 3 and 4. Although the data has many gaps, the National Park Service believes it provides sufficient information to set provisional indicators and standards. The application of indicators and standards through the Visitor Experience-Resource Protection (VERP) process is the recommended methodology for NPS managers to meet statutory requirements for addressing carrying capacity in General Management Plan documents. The NPS VERP Handbook (NPS 1997b) provides guidance to managers on the entire process. The Handbook specifically recommends establishing provisional indicators and standards in instances where additional information is needed to assure validity and monitoring feasibility. It is essential to have good data in order to provide a realistic picture of what the standards imply for management. However, this "baseline" is mostly important for determining the realism of a standard, because ultimately standard setting is a subjective process based on what is desired for the future, not on current conditions.

NPCA-5

The monitoring language related to visitor surveys has been adjusted to indicate that such surveys would take place "at least once every five years." The detailed monitoring program to be developed during implementation would establish the optimal time periods for repeating surveys.

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at least the first five years after which adjustments can be made for a longer time period if it can be shown a longer time period will impact the quality of data needed track changes to the backcountry conditions that make Denali such a desirable place to visit.

For changes in physical conditions to trails and campsites you only cite “field observations” to describe how these will be monitored. The plan needs to include much more information about these “field observations,” such as who is making these observations? How often are they made? Weekly? Monthly? Seasonally? What form will this data be collected so that it can withstand the scrutiny it undoubtedly will receive when it is used by park managers to seek restrictions or closures based on resource damage? There must be a rigorous data collection plan so that all data is uniformly observed, cataloged, and evaluated so it CAN withstand such scrutiny.

The Achilles Heel to this whole plan is the monitoring program. In times of limited funds, NPCA is very concerned that funding for the monitoring necessary to properly implement this plan simply will not be available, leaving wilderness, wildlife, solitude, natural quiet and other park resources at risk. Key among these impacts are those from recreational snowmobiling, an activity that the NPS preferred alternative says can occur in the four million acres added to the park in 1980.

NPCA asks that the National Park Service not implement this plan until a monitoring program is fully developed in partnership with the public, including formation of a Citizens Advisory Committee, and fully funded in the operating budget of the park. Major details of and a specific implementation timeline for the monitoring program should be included in the Final EIS and the Record of Decision (ROD), as discussed in Council on Environmental Quality’s (CEQ) “Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning CEQ’s NEPA Regulations. Question 34c states, in part, that “the discussion of mitigation and monitoring in a Record of Decision must be more detailed than a general statement that mitigation is being required.” Detail, which is lacking in the Revised Draft, must be included in Final EIS and the ROD.

When NPS selects a final preferred alternative and details its specific impacts, NPS must also include a mitigation plan that specifically addresses those impacts. We look forward to reviewing this mitigation plan in the FEIS.

The Record of Decision must also discuss the necessary funding for the monitoring plan. What is the cost of the monitoring program? The cost analysis on page 520 appears overly generalized to be of much use. Nonetheless, it is clear that Alternatives 2 and 3 are significantly more cost effective than Alternatives 4 and 5. This makes sense since the higher number alternatives rely more on goal setting and standards than prescriptive management. In recent years Denali has had a declining budget and as a result has cut a number of staff positions. Nevertheless, successful implementation of this plan relies heavily on monitoring and enforcement – two items requiring a great deal of money and staff. Based on the numbers presented in the cost analysis it appears a more prescriptive approach to backcountry management is better not only to protect park resources, but also more cost effective.

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Response to Comments

NPCA-6

See TWS-8 and PpP-4.

NPCA-7

See the discussion under PpP-4 and NPCA-10. See discussion of mitigation and monitoring at DCC-32. Mitigation will be discussed in the Record of Decision as required by CEQ regulations.

NPCA-8

The National Park Service did not identify mitigation measures under any of the alternatives. The BCMP is largely a management strategy to respond to existing and expanding uses in the Denali backcountry. As a result, the NPS considers the plan’s indicators and standards, associated monitoring strategies, access management tools, and most other provisions as alternative actions, not mitigation measures, although they are in a sense “mitigating” the impacts of existing use. The Record of Decision will address mitigation as required by regulation.

NPCA-9

Adequate funding is necessary to implement the plan, and the National Park Service intends to use the finalized BCMP as a tool to articulate needs for funding for monitoring and management. The National Park Service would also take advantage of existing funded efforts such as the Central Alaska Network’s Vital Signs Monitoring Program and the mandated Resource Stewardship Plan to accomplish many of the indicated actions. However, if funding were not available for adequate monitoring and enforcement, the National Park Service would act proactively to prevent harm to park resources by managing visitor use through rule-making or other more prescriptive means.

Comments

As the monitoring plan moves ahead several key funding questions still loom. Will there be new funding made available to implement the monitoring program? If no new funds are made available, how does the Park Service propose to monitor its Desired Future Conditions with existing staff that is already overloaded with work? What existing park functions will stop to provide for the necessary funding for the monitoring program? These questions must be answered in the Record of Decision.

NPCA suggests formation of a Citizens Advisory Committee to assist NPS with developing and implementing the monitoring program. This is going to be especially important during the development stage of the monitoring plan. This entire plan hinges on monitoring for changes. It cannot be emphasized enough that monitoring data needs to be annually collected, collection protocols consistently applied, and the results rigorously tested to ensure that it can withstand the pressure that will come when NPS uses the data to propose closures and restrictions.

10

Define Traditional Activities – ANILCA section 1110 (a) provides for access by snowmobile, airplane, motorboat, and other non-motorized methods for traditional activities, and for travel to and from villages and homesites. In making the regulatory determination that snowmobiles are not allowed in the Old Park, NPS rightly defined traditional activities to be those actions necessary to perpetuate a rural lifestyle, actions such as sport hunting, fishing, managing a trapline, and berry picking. NPCA appreciates the addition of alternatives (#2 and #3) in the revised draft that recognize the need to define traditional activities for the park and preserve the same as for the Old Park. This definition is key to future management of the park especially regarding snowmobiles. The RDEIS specifically recognizes that this definition should be applied to the new park additions in its discussion of Alternative #2 where the draft plan clearly states that the Park Service would define traditional activities “for all areas of the park and preserve and for all modes of access using the present definition employed for snowmachine access in the Old Park (36CFR 13.63(h)).”

This Old Park definition clearly recognizes that Congress did not anticipate recreational snowmobile use when it acknowledged snowmobile use for traditional activities. The legislative intent is clear that a traditional activity was to support the continuation of a rural lifestyle and that recreational use was NOT to be considered a traditional activity. And in support of this Congressional intent, the National Park Service, clearly recognizes in its Old Park definition that recreation was not a traditional activity envisioned by Congress when it passed ANILCA.

It is unclear why the National Park Service is not applying the Old Park definition of traditional activities to the park additions and the preserve. It is unclear how the National Park Service can make recommendations in this plan to permit snowmobile access to the park in its preferred alternative without this basic definition. The ONLY way that snowmobiles can be allowed in Denali is for traditional activities. Recreational snowmobiling, including high-marking, powder-surfing, and glacier exploration, are not

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Response to Comments

NPCA-10

The National Park Service encourages public involvement in the development of the monitoring program. In the Implementation section of the modified preferred alternative, the formation of a chartered FACA (Federal Advisory Committee Act) committee would advise the National Park Service on all aspects of plan implementation, with subcommittees addressing topics of particular concern such as overflights (Aircraft Overflights Working Group), hiking impacts, and monitoring.

NPCA-11

See P&P-5.

Comments

the kinds of activities Congress envisioned when they provided for access to perpetuate the traditional rural lifestyle. Yet the Revised Draft preferred alternative addresses the need to define traditional activities by dismissing it. Without a traditional activities definition, the Park Service has NO BASIS for determining what kind of snowmobile access can be allowed in the park additions and preserve.

We support adopting the definition of traditional activities currently in use in the Old Park for the entire Park & Preserve. We are disappointed the preferred alternative does not define traditional activities and strongly urge you to include this in the final decision.

State of Alaska misguided on Title XI implementation - In their comments on the Plan's first draft in 2003, the State of Alaska frequently states that basic park management techniques (such as zoning, permits, or use limits) constitute a closure and are illegal under ANILCA. We strenuously challenge this assertion and find no language in ANILCA to back their claim. While the Park Service has a duty to allow the use of snowmobiles, motorboats, airplanes and other means of non-motorized surface transportation for access to traditional activities according to ANILCA Section 1110(a), such use is neither unlimited nor absolute. First of all, this provision is a narrow exemption that only applies to special access for the continuation of "traditional activities". It is not a general statement for all proposed park activities for all purposes that overrides nationwide NPS regulations and prohibitions as the State implies. Secondly, the use of these transportation methods are subject to "*reasonable regulations...to protect the natural and other values*" of parks (ANILCA 1110(a)). Finally, the Secretary may prohibit the use of these certain modes of transportation if it is "*detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area*" (ANILCA 1110(a)). Other than providing for reasonable, regulated access for existing traditional activities, nothing in ANILCA Section 1110(a) or elsewhere purports to expand the nature or scope of allowable activities within Alaska's national parks.

No Recreational Snowmobiling – NPCA is opposed to recreational snowmachining in national parks. What NPS proposes in the preferred alternative does not fall under the special access provisions of ANILCA 1110(a) and is clearly illegal. While the Revised draft plan states "the preferred alternative contains no explicit authorization for recreational snowmachine access" (p. 2), this is simply not true. In the preferred alternative NPS proposes two types of snowmobiling, both of which include recreation and both of which NPCA opposes for the following reasons.

1. Snowmachine Corridors – "Access for Wilderness Recreation"
The Park Service is proposing snowmachine corridors under the guise they are necessary "*to provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering and other wilderness recreational activities*" in accordance with ANILCA section 202(3)(a). However, this reasoning is disingenuous at best. It is simply an excuse to allow illegal recreational riding. In reality the corridors are not providing access by snowmobile to something. If the corridors led to an ice-climbing route inaccessible by plane, and visitors used a

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Response to Comments

NPCA-12

Corridors are designated to provide high-use travel routes into the backcountry from which visitors would disperse. The winter Corridors in the Dunkle Hills/Broad Pass and Tokositna areas provide access for all park users, not just those utilizing snowmachines for traditional activities. It is hoped that they would in part be used by non-motorized winter visitors who wish to access the Denali Wilderness on the south side of the Alaska Range, where snow conditions are often better than on the north side. This plan is intended to be valid for 20 years; the National Park Service is not only planning for present demand, but also to accommodate and guide future demand. Recognizing that present needs may not require these winter-season Corridors, the text of the modified preferred alternative was adjusted to indicate that the winter season Corridors on the south side of the Alaska Range would be implemented only "if demand is sufficient."

Comments

snowmobile as transportation to go climbing, it would make sense. However this is not the case. No one requires or has requested such access. The snowmobile corridors are not providing transportation to a recreational activity. The snowmobiling is the activity. Therefore in essence, this provision authorizes recreational snowmachine use.

2. Access for “Undefined” Traditional Activities

NPCA honors the narrow exemption ANILCA section 1110(a) makes to allow snowmobile use for access to traditional activities, such as subsistence and sport hunting, fishing, berry picking, and travel between villages. However, by not clarifying a definition for traditional activities for the park additions and preserve, NPS is making a de facto decision to allow all types of snowmobiling, including for recreation. This is clearly in violation of the intent outlined in ANILCA and the Congressional record for access for traditional activities.

Soundscape Must Be Protected – One of the greatest assets of our national parks is they provide a refuge to escape the sights and sounds of the workaday world, a place where the sounds of nature, not man, predominate. Hearing the chatter of a squirrel, the call of a thrush, or the babbling of a brook does much to reconnect our harried selves to the natural world and renew our spirits. The intrinsic value of natural soundscape is of great importance a large wilderness park such as Denali. The direction of Directors Order 47, the Organic Act, and NPS Management Policies all make clear the obligation to protect Denali’s natural soundscape. One of our greatest concerns with this plan is the impact allowed to the natural soundscape of Denali’s backcountry.

NPCA staff Joan Frankevich recalls a 5-day backpacking trip she took in Denali’s Old Park in 1984. On the last day, looking up into the sky, she saw a contrail from a jet and realized that with the exception of her two companions, she had been completely out of sight and sound of the manmade world. What a rare and magnificent experience Denali provided. To read the backcountry observational data (pages 136-137) and learn that such an experience has practically disappeared in 20 years and may no longer be available for future generations is truly distressing. One of Denali’s greatest assets is it provides an accessible wilderness experience to a wide variety of backcountry users. It is the duty of this plan to preserve such experiences, especially in the designated Wilderness (Old Park). NPCA regrets the loss of the voluntary flight restrictions around the Wilderness core of the park as outlined in the preliminary alternatives presented in the Denali Dispatch in 2001. We support this plan’s proposal to form an Aircraft Overflights Working Group and request at least two environmental seats comprise this group. We strongly urge NPS and this Working Group to create voluntary flight corridors to protect and improve the soundscape of the Old Park. Additionally, we request Wonder Lake be closed to private airplane landings due to its outstanding scenic setting, nesting loons, and other resource values.

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Response to Comments

NPCA-13

The composition of the Aircraft Overflights Working Group would include balanced representation from all parties that have an interest in aircraft activities over Denali. However, the exact number and composition of the working group would be determined during plan implementation. Likewise, while voluntary flight corridors could be a method used to achieve desired natural sound conditions, the modified preferred alternative concerns itself only with setting the goals and identifying the tools that could be used to achieve the goals. Specific prescriptions are deferred to implementation, and voluntary flight corridors remain only one tool of many that could be utilized.

NPCA-14

See DCC-24.

Comments

In order to support a range of mountaineering experiences on the park's southside that includes some climbing areas free from the noise and intrusion of scenic air tours we support allowing scenic air tour landings on glaciers in all areas designated as

Management Area A of our revised Management Area map. Should that map not be adopted as the final, we would strongly suggest the following change to the existing preferred alternative - *scenic air tours should be exempted from the Eldridge Glacier, Little Switzerland, Pika Glacier, and the Ramparts. Additionally, in order to provide some quieter time for backcountry users, as well as cabins and homes in the flight paths, scenic air tours should be allowed to operate from 9am to 9pm or less.*

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We are concerned with the extraordinary growth in glacier landings on the south side of the park. In just ten recent years, from 1991 to 2001, the number of scenic landings on the Ruth Glacier increased more than 800%, from 220 to 1800. In 2002 aircraft were audible in more than 50% (maximum 80%) of the sound monitoring samples collected every five minutes between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. on good weather days in the Ruth Glacier area. While flightseeing provides a spectacular park experience, it should not be so sacred to be exempt from reasonable limits and regulations. Occasionally park buses fill and a visitor must wait a day to travel the park road. This principle should apply to air visitors as well. Also, the visitor who is in the air one day is more than likely to be a visitor on the ground the next. When on the ground this same visitor will likely appreciate the ability to hear the natural sounds of Denali more than the sounds of aircraft.

We commend the Park Service for the depth with which they discuss and include important intangible resources such as soundscape into the Revised Draft. However, we are concerned with the standards set for allowed noise intrusions, especially by snowmobiles in corridors, airplane overflights in the Old Park, and landings in Portals and Major Landing Areas. We find the standards for both the High (up to 25% noise intrusions in any hour) and Very High (up to 50%) categories for Natural Sound Disturbance to be unacceptable. Based on seminars, conferences, and conversations with NPS that NPCA staff have had over the years, we understand that appropriate noise levels for backcountry areas are considered to be in the 5% - 15% range. Noise levels of 25% seem quite high for the recommended Wilderness portions of the Denali backcountry, with 50% completely unwarranted. To be in the backcountry and be unable to hear the sounds of nature half the time seems to us to have easily reached the level of impairment. We question the statements made in the section on Environmental

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Consequences for Natural Soundscape (pages 281-308). All action alternatives state they would "not result in impairment of park resources". Interestingly, the No Action Alternative concludes that soundscape impacts "could" result in impairment. We ask what criteria did you use to determine what does and does not constitute impairment? What is the threshold level for when a major impact reaches impairment? We request both the standards for High and Very High either be completely removed or lowered considerably in the final plan.

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OHV use needs to be clarified - The Revised Draft considered, but did not address ORV use in Denali by recognizing that ORV uses can only occur on state rights-of-way, under

Response to Comments

NPCA-15

See P&P-7.

NPCA-16

The National Park Service agrees that standards for natural sound disturbance in areas protected for their wilderness resource values should be set at a medium level (as described in the modified preferred alternative) or below. However, some level of natural sound disturbance is necessary to provide for other statutory park purposes, such as providing access for wilderness recreational activities or for scenic viewing and interpretation of Mount McKinley and surrounding mountain peaks and formations. The amount of natural sound disturbance allowed within Management Area A and the Ruth Glacier Special Use Area is presently necessary in order to accomplish these park purposes, but the direction of the modified preferred alternative is to keep the size of these areas to a minimum and direct increases in backcountry visitation that is not wilderness-related to these areas.

NPCA-17

The definition of impairment for resource values and the definitions for minor, moderate, and major impacts are all contained within the introduction to Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences. The definition for impairment reads, "A resource would no longer fulfill the specific purposes identified in the park's establishing legislation or its role in maintaining the natural integrity of the park." NPS believes that major adverse impacts can occur without impairment, as is the case with natural sound disturbance under the modified preferred alternative. Although some small areas of the park additions do have major adverse impacts, the protection of the rest of the park additions and preserve, along with conditions that are anticipated to improve within the designated wilderness of the Old Park, lead to a conclusion that impairment would not occur. See the analysis for Natural Soundscape in chapter 4.

Comments

an 1110(b) access permit to inholdings in Kantishna, and that the GMP does not authorize ORV use under ANILCA Section 811 because they were not traditionally employed for subsistence purposes. However, we are aware of the on-going effort to review subsistence ORV use in and around Cantwell. The Final BCMP needs to recognize that there is a process for changing the GMP's no-subsistence use position through a separate "Finding" process, such as the effort in the Cantwell Area. That recognition in the Final BCMP needs to clearly state that any change to the ORV prohibition will only come about through a determination that shows such use is well established over a long period of time, is multi-generational, and that historically documented community-wide subsistence ORV use occurred on the trail(s) in question prior to the enactment of ANILCA. If a determination is issued, the subsequent subsistence ORV use is subject to reasonable regulation necessary to prevent waste or damage to fish, wildlife, terrain, and other Park resources or values and in such a matter as to prevent the harassment, hazing, or herding of wildlife. Subsistence ORV use should be managed under a permit system and only allowed on designated trails. Until a final determination is made in the Cantwell Area, the Revised Draft is clear that subsistence ORV use is not allowed in the park.

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NPS Must Acknowledge its Wilderness Management Responsibilities - Denali National Park & Preserve is in fact a wilderness park and its purposes under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980 are to preserve those wilderness values. In 1986, as required by ANILCA section 1317 (a), the National Park Service conducted a wilderness suitability review of the 4 million acre New Park. The final environmental impact statement concluded that approximately 3.73 of the 4 million additional acres were suitable for wilderness designation. At that time NPS forwarded a wilderness recommendation of 2.25 million acres to the Secretary of the Interior but the Secretary did not send it to the President as required by ANILCA. There has been no formal action since continuing NPS' failure to comply with statutory and regulatory mandates with respect to wilderness.

The Revised Draft identifies the purpose of the BCMP as the place to address issues for which the guidance in the 1986 General Management Plan is out of date (page 21). The Revised Draft acknowledges that the wilderness suitability review included in the 1986 GMP is now out of date since a new suitability study would likely result in additional acreage identified as suitable in the Kantishna Hills (page 26).

Yet despite this admission and a clear legal mandate, NPS refuses to address wilderness suitability in the preferred alternative "because of the complexity of the process and the fact that wilderness designation requires congressional action" (page 26). The NPS process for reviewing and recommending wilderness is clearly outlined and within the purview of the National Park Service and Department of the Interior. Only actual designation requires congressional action. In addition, the Revised Draft provides no explanation as to when it will fulfill its obligations to complete the assessment and recommendation process. NPS must take immediate and effective action to bring the National Park System into compliance with its wilderness assessment, recommendation,

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Response to Comments

NPCA-18

Subsistence use is outside the scope of the Backcountry Management Plan. Since ORV use under Section 811 is entirely related to subsistence use, it was not considered within the framework of the BCMP. Text changes to chapter 1 and chapter 2 in the *Final EIS* make factual corrections to statements regarding ORVs in light of the recent finding regarding traditionally employed ORV use in the Cantwell area.

NPCA-19

See P&P-6.

Comments

and planning mandates. NPS must complete the unfinished business of ANILCA section 1317 to effectively complete the backcountry planning process.

Wilderness Needs a Wilderness Plan - NPS Management Policies state that all parks with wilderness resources must have wilderness plans or equivalent documents. And Wilderness Plans and Backcountry Plans are not equivalent documents. In order for a backcountry plan to be an “equivalent document” it must contain the area specific objectives and prescriptions needed to maintain wilderness qualities and attributes. The Revised Draft encompasses both wilderness and non-wilderness resources and as such is not focused adequately on protecting the area’s unique wilderness qualities.

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The Wilderness Act is different than the NPS Organic Act and as such dictates a different management regime. The need for a differing regime calls for a specific wilderness management plan. Wilderness resources are distinct from other NPS backcountry resources and to maintain the unique qualities that qualify them as wilderness or potential wilderness they need to be managed as distinct areas within the NPS. Management by Desired Future Conditions sets up a situation where wilderness resources are managed only when something bad looks to or has actually occurred. This management by reaction works against wilderness preservation goals because management direction can easily be shaped by a succession of minor decisions. The cumulative results of such decisions may be undesirable and hard to reverse in wilderness.

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As a result, the National Park Service must manage all suitable 3.73 million acres of backcountry in Denali National Park as wilderness to protect wilderness character, consistent with the direction of NPS Management Policies (section 6.3.1), that includes categories of suitable, study, proposed, recommended, and designated wilderness within the scope of its wilderness resource management policy (NPS 2001). Wilderness character includes the natural and scenic condition of the land, natural numbers and interactions of wildlife and the integrity of ecological processes. At its core, wilderness character is more than a physical condition. ANILCA section 101 specifically identifies “preserve wilderness resource values” as a fundamental purpose of the Act.

Despite these mandates, however, the Park Service states that it will only manage the 2.25 million acres of recommended wilderness for wilderness values (page 26). This statement impermissibly lessens the management responsibility for the 1.48 million acres of remaining suitable wilderness that was not recommended. The Park Service must recognize that all lands suitable for wilderness must be managed as wilderness.

Adjusting Management Areas for Better Park Protection - Application of the standards and indicators for Desired Future Conditions is in management areas proposed for the entire park and preserve. NPCA has reviewed the draft management area assignments and, like the People for Parks Alternative, find that none of the existing maps accurately reflects how we would like to see these management areas applied on the ground. Using Alternative #3 as the closest to our thinking, we are submitting an alternative management area designation map for NPS consideration (copy attached). The primary

Response to Comments

NPCA -20

NPS Management Policies clearly indicate that Wilderness Management Plans should include all wilderness resources, including on lands that have been determined suitable or have been recommended for wilderness designation. Since almost the entire backcountry falls into one of these categories, and since statutory and policy direction places an emphasis on protecting “wilderness resource values” and “wilderness recreational opportunities,” it is reasonable to incorporate the Wilderness Management Plan requirements into the BCMP. This plan does “contain the area specific objectives and prescriptions needed to maintain wilderness qualities and attributes” and has a significant focus on protecting the area’s unique wilderness qualities. The objectives are contained within the Management Area descriptions and the prescriptions needed to maintain these wilderness qualities and attributes are spelled out in the remainder of the plan’s actions.

NPCA -21

Management through the VERP process is not reactive if it is appropriately implemented. Monitoring is intended to reveal trends in resource conditions, and if the trends indicate that standards would be exceeded in the future, the National Park Service can and should take proactive management steps to manage use and assure that the standards are met. The modified preferred alternative does commit the National Park Service to manage all categories of wilderness within the framework of its wilderness management plan.

Comments

differences being a change in the area around Kantishna from A to B and changes in parts of the Old Park from OP1 to OP2.

While Kantishna does support a number of backcountry lodges, there is no need to sacrifice the visitor experience in that area by allowing high levels of contact. It is an area that lends itself to spreading out use and the goal should be to provide Kantishna visitors with at least a medium encounter rate with minimal trail disturbance and evidence of modern human use. Ensuring this level of visitor experience will be greatly enhanced with the completion of the Kantishna Master Plan. No significant changes to Kantishna Area management should occur until that plan is completed. As such, a change from A to B is suggested.

A medium encounter rate with people and evidence of modern human use is appropriate for the Old Park east of the Muddy River and within seven miles of the park road. But beyond the seven-mile mark, which we think is about the extent of even the most aggressive day-hikers, the Old Park east of the Muddy should be managed as OP2 for very low encounter rates and low evidence of modern human use.

Impact Analysis Needs Improving - The environmental consequences analysis of not only the preferred alternative, but of all the alternatives, seems to be built upon anticipated changes to the current conditions of both park resources and the visitor experience by the proposed actions. Those changes are described in the plan from negligible to major in the summary table of Environmental Consequences (page 93). Yet some of the current conditions, as is the case with soundscape, are already at a level that certainly impact the park and could be classified as impairment. How can a plan be developed that measures the impact of a range of alternatives when the baseline against which those alternatives are measured is already showing distress? NPCA is concerned that the impact descriptions in the Revised Draft do not take into account impacts that are already occurring. Any course of action proposed by the Park Service to mitigate these impacts must include not only the anticipated future changes but also the changes that have already impacted park resources and values. This lack of recognition of the impact of the existing conditions in the park needs to be remedied in the Final Plan and a true description of impacts to park resources, which includes those changes that have already taken place, must be included.

Backcountry Facilities

We support the use of communication facilities to support park management, although we highly endorse the use of satellite phones to limit structures in the park. Providing a cell tower network for commercial communications however, is unacceptable to NPCA.

Easements and Boundary Changes

NPCA supports the need to secure a 17(b) easement near Windy Creek and the proposed boundary adjustment with the State of Alaska.

Response to Comments

NPCA -22

See DCC-34 and DCC-36.

NPCA -23

The summary table necessarily leaves out some information. The complete analysis in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences clearly describes existing levels of impact and reaches conclusions about cumulative consequences to park resources from past, present, and future actions unrelated to the actions in the BCMP. The results of plan actions are then evaluated to determine their impacts as well as the overall cumulative affects of the plan actions plus the other past, present, and future actions. See also TWS-9.

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Comments

People for Parks Alternative Blends A Better Future For Denali – In reviewing the actions specific to the four alternatives presented in the Revised Draft, NPCA and others felt that a blending of alternatives #2, #3, and #4 provided the best management direction for the future of Denali. Those specific actions, transmitted to the National Park Service in previous correspondence, are again listed here with a bit more explanation.

| Category | Alternative | Explanation/Rationale |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|---|
| General Concept | 2 | Denali should continue to be managed as a wilderness park with non-motorized opportunities for wilderness experiences that are markedly different than surrounding public lands. This has been consistently commented on in this letter and our proposal for using alternative #2 language is consistent with our comments. The park superintendent should not be held to the least restrictive tool when a slightly more restrictive tool would better guarantee no damage to park resources. |
| Motorized Access | 2/3 modified | As described previously in this letter, apply the definition of <i>traditional activities</i> currently used in the Old Park to the entire Park & Preserve. |
| Registration | 2 | We support convenient registration for all backcountry day users in order to provide park managers with information for better management. Any study of a registration program should only need to look at how best to implement a system, not whether it is needed. The heavy emphasis in this plan on Desired Future Conditions is contingent upon the Park Service having up-to-date data on park users. We fail to see how the Park Service could even consider not requiring registrations to provide such sorely needed data while at the same time endorsing a management regime that is data dependent. |
| Climbing Limits | 3 | We agree that a modest increase of climbers over current levels to 1500 to be reevaluated in 10 years is a needed and reasonable limit. |
| <u>Commercial Airplane Landings</u> | 3 | In order to support a range of mountaineering experiences that includes some climbing areas free from the noise and intrusion of scenic air tours we support allowing scenic air tour landings on glaciers in all areas designated as Management Area A of our revised Management Area map. Should that map not be adopted as the final, we would strongly suggest the following change to the existing preferred alternative, <i>except scenic tour landings would not be allowed on the Eldridge Glacier, Little Switzerland or the Ramparts. Scenic air tour landings</i> |

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Response to Comments

NPCA-24

The National Park Service agrees that data on visitor use are important for successful plan implementation. The process of registering visitors involves a commitment of resources that may not always be cost-effective given use levels or availability of other indicative data. The modified preferred alternative establishes criteria for imposing new registration requirements, imposing requirements only

- 1) in areas where use levels are sufficient enough that user conflicts and/or resource damage are occurring or would occur and
- 2) when other methods for obtaining accurate information on visitor use and conveying essential visitor safety and resource protection information are unlikely to succeed.

NPCA-25

See P&P-7.

Comments

Response to Comments

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|------------------------------------|--------------|--|
| | | <i>would be restricted to 9 am to 9 pm.</i> |
| <u>Commercial Guided Hiking</u> | 3/4 modified | We support the guided hiking options in Alternative 3 with the following modifications: <i>No guided backpacking should be allowed in the Kantishna Hills until there is a comprehensive plan for management of the Kantishna region.</i> Only educational programs should use the entrance area trails, with the exception of the trails listed in Alternative 4 which could be used for guided hiking. |
| <u>Guided Sport Hunting</u> | 2 | Retain the status quo. |
| <u>Other Commercial Activities</u> | 2 | Retain the status quo. |
| Trails | 4 | While we support the “no formal trails” policy for Denali’s backcountry we recognize that several unplanned social trails exist and that park resources are best protected by constructing trails as needed in the areas listed in Alternative 4. We assume EAs will be written and the public involved when any trail construction moves forward in the park. |
| Park Road | no choice | We support improved access for non-motorized winter sports such as cross-country skiing, ski-joring, and dog mushing. Any combination of alternatives 1-4 that achieves this goal and is amenable to local users is acceptable. |
| Campsites | 2 modified | We recommend no campsites be designated in the Kantishna Hills as they are not needed at this time. If resource damage appears to be imminent, then NPS should look at options ranging from closing the site to hardening it and creating a designated campsite. |
| Shelters and Cabins | 3 | We support facilities at the park entrance that promote opportunities for non-motorized winter recreation. |
| <u>Information Facilities</u> | 3 modified | We don’t support a new facility in the Cantwell/Broad Pass area unless there is a demonstrated need. We recommend changing “ <i>would operate</i> ” to “ <i>could operate</i> ”. |
| <u>Administrative Camps</u> | 3 | Retain the status quo. |
| <u>Information & Education</u> | 3 modified | We support the educational opportunities outlined in Alternative 3 with the elimination of designated campsites in Kantishna. Designated campsites could be created when and if resource impacts show a demonstrated need. |

Denali National Park is the crown jewel of Alaska’s national park system. The Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan has the opportunity to perpetuate Denali’s uniqueness by protecting its wildlife, natural sound, solitude, and wilderness character IF

Comments

the proper alternative is ultimately chosen. That alternative needs to provide the park superintendent with the management authority to take action to prevent resource impacts and reduce threats that could lead to impairment without the threat of meddling by those with a political agenda. That alternative needs to recognize that extending the Old Park definition of traditional activities to the new park additions would serve to protect many of the park's resources that we feel are at risk. That alternative needs to provide for appropriate visitor use and a high quality visitor experience without changing the park's wilderness character. We trust the Park Service will provide the public with a revision of their current preferred alternative and that the park will be better for it.

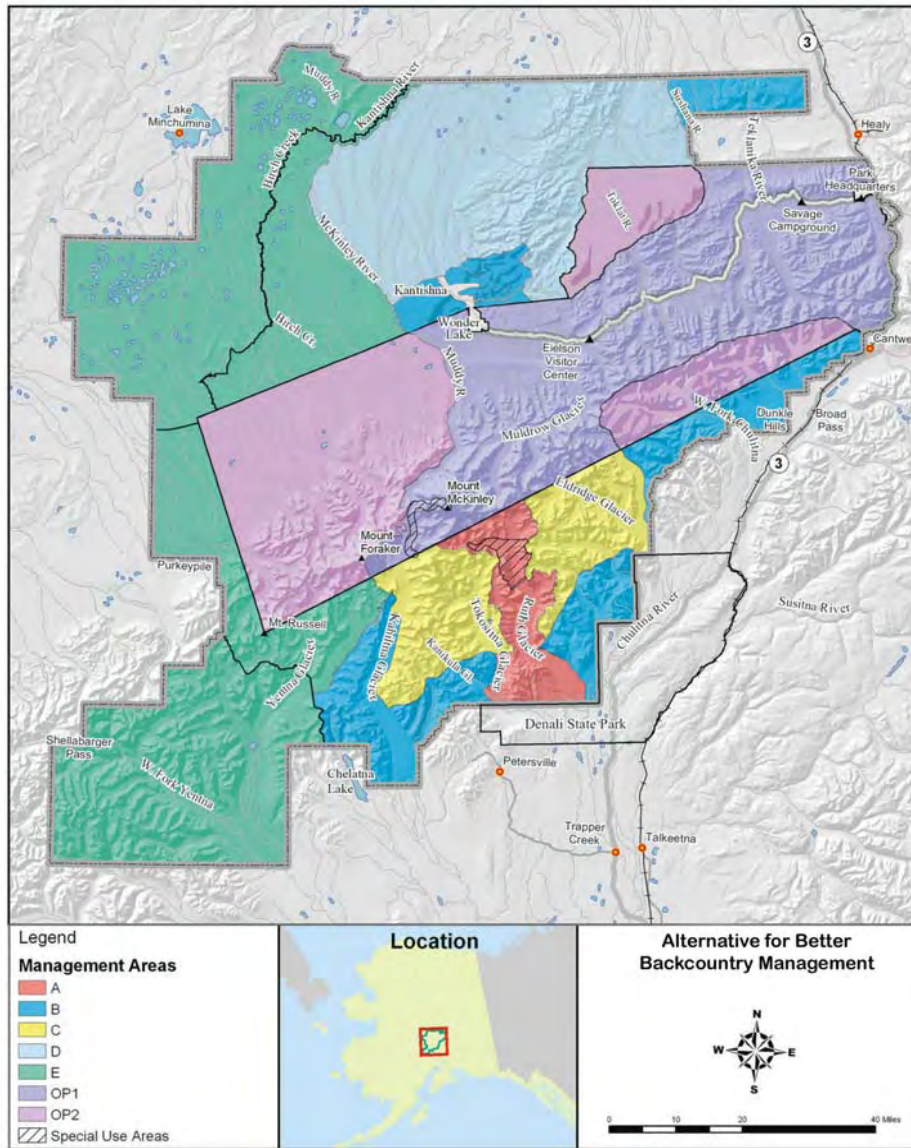
Sincerely,

Jim Stratton
Alaska Regional Director

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Comments

The Wilderness Society* Alaska Center for the Environment Natural Resource Defense Council *Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

July 15, 2005

Paul Anderson, Superintendent
Denali National Park & Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIS) for Denali National Park & Preserve Backcountry Management Plan (BCMP) prepared by the National Park Service (NPS) and released for public review April 25, 2005. The comments below are presented on behalf of The Wilderness Society, Natural Resource Defense Council, Alaska Center for the Environment and Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club. These comments supplement the comments previously submitted by our respective organizations on March 15, 2001; July 18, 2002; May 30, 2003 and June 16, 2005. In addition, we incorporate by reference here the comments submitted by the National Parks Conservation Association July 15, 2005.

While we applaud the Park Service for revising the original draft plan, we are disappointed in the Park Service's failure to adequately address our concerns with the February 2003 DEIS and we are deeply troubled by the agency's proposed changes to the underlying management framework and accompanying preferred alternative. We fail to understand how the Park Service can claim an alternative that allows recreational snowmachining in a significant portion of the Park, reduces wilderness suitability and by the agency's own admission allows increased impacts to wildlife, vegetation, natural soundscape, subsistence and cultural resources meets its legal and policy mandates much less the criteria as the "environmentally preferred alternative" for one of the nation's premier Parks.

The Park Service clearly details in the RDEIS the agency's duty under governing law, regulation and policy to assure that national park resources are protected in an unimpaired state for the benefit and enjoyment of this and future generations. Unfortunately the Park Service then selectively applies them. We respectfully request NPS adopt the *People for the Parks Alternative* as the only alternative that meets the Park Service's law and policy mandates. The *People for the Parks Alternative* provides a better future for Denali National Park and Preserve, a future that supports fully functional ecosystems while providing a range of opportunities for hundreds of thousands of visitors every year to experience Alaska's wildlife and wilderness.

I. SUMMARY OF KEY CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The NPS mission was clearly elucidated by Congress and has been reaffirmed over the years. NPS has an **affirmative** responsibility to implement management actions that ensure full compliance, or go well beyond simple compliance, with law, regulation and policy now and in the future. NPS has an affirmative responsibility to **prevent** impairment of park resources including but not limited to solitude and natural soundscapes. Upon review of the above referenced RDEIS we have found significant failings in the alternatives and the subsequent environmental effects analysis. We are concerned these failings place the extraordinary resources of Denali at risk. We respectfully request NPS adopt the *People for the Parks Alternative* as the only alternative that meets the Park Service's law and policy mandates.

Specifically:

- In describing the current situation, the RDEIS details the Park Service's failure to effectively manage park resource values. By proposing an even less prescriptive management framework than in the 1986 General Management Plan or in the February 2003 DEIS, the NPS fails to fulfill its affirmative management responsibility.
- The desired future conditions framework is designed with so much flexibility it is unclear what if any standards will be mitigated and where. At a minimum, the FEIS must detail a monitoring and

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enforcement plan and allow opportunities for public comment. The BCMP can not be implemented until this plan is completed and fully funded.

- The Environmental Consequences Analysis is fundamentally flawed and inadequate under NEPA. NPS measures the impacts of the action alternatives against the illegal activity in the existing conditions as portrayed in the no-action alternative. Furthermore, NPS arbitrarily applies impact levels and impairment findings. NPS must complete a new analysis in the FEIS.
- The preferred alternative violates the Wilderness Act, the National Park Service Organic Act, ANILCA and National Park Service policies by allowing recreational snowmobiling in the 1980 park and preserve additions (New Park).
- NPS recognizes it's legal mandate to protect equally the range of resource values including intrinsic values (solitude, natural soundscape) but the NPS non-impairment findings for motorized recreational uses in the New Park are arbitrary and capricious under the Administrative Procedures Act.
- Contrary to NPS assertions, the preferred alternative does not satisfy NEPA Sec. 101 criteria and therefore can not be the "environmentally preferred alternative" as defined in 40 CFR 1505.2(b).
- Contrary to NPS assertions, a traditional activities definition is necessary prior to NPS adoption of any of the action alternatives.
- NPS fails to adequately address the significant adverse impacts of overflights on Park resources and values. The RDEIS can not assume environmental benefits from "voluntary" guidelines yet to be developed or agreed upon by the interested parties.
- The RDEIS interim soundscape plan fails to meet the agency's statutory and regulatory mandates by arbitrarily allowing significant impacts to the natural soundscape. The Park Service must develop a stronger Soundscape Preservation and Noise Management Plan prior to adopting a preferred alternative that does not allow high and very high noise disturbance thresholds.
- The preferred alternative fails to fulfill NPS statutory and regulatory mandates for designated and suitable wilderness. The Park Service must complete a Wilderness Management Plan prior to adopting a preferred alternative and complete the ANILCA 1317 wilderness review process.

We are encouraged by the Park Service's continued commitment to safeguard the 2 million acre Wilderness core of Denali, the former Mount McKinley National Park (Old Park). The designated Wilderness of Denali has been free of snowmobiles since it was established in 1917 and the NPS June 2000 regulation (65 FR 37863) solidified this long-standing prohibition. **We also applaud** the Park Service's continued strong position on off road vehicles, personal watercraft and airboats (RDEIS p.188 and p.458).

The future of Denali National Park and Preserve is at a crossroads. The choice before the Park Service is simple: to uphold protections of Denali from the adverse impacts of motorized recreation or to allow degradation of this national treasure. The ultimate choice will have a profound and far-reaching impact on all of Alaska's national parks.

II. THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE PREEMINENT PARK NPS RESPONSIBILITY: PROTECTION OF RESOURCES

Denali National Park must comply with the Organic Act, the Redwood Act, the Wilderness Act, NPS regulations, NPS Management Policies and Executive Orders 11644 and 11989. The level of motorized access and motorized recreation proposed for the New Park in the RDEIS preferred alternative violates these existing laws and regulations. The purpose of the National Park System is clear: to protect park resources and ensure that visitor use does not cause impairment.

Specific impacts and findings will be discussed in sections III- VII.

A. Highest Standard: The Organic Act of 1916

The National Parks are intended to preserve the nation's treasures in perpetuity. This can only be accomplished by preserving and maintaining each park's special features and the ability of citizens to enjoy those features. When it created the National Park Service in 1916, Congress gave the agency a clear mission:

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...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. (16 U.S.C. §1 et seq)

Congress reaffirmed and further clarified the Park Service mission in the 1978 Redwood Act, stating:

...the protection, management, and administration of these areas shall be conducted in light of the high public value and integrity of the National Park system and shall not be exercised in derogation of the values and purposes for which these various areas have been established....

The fundamental purpose of parks also includes “enjoyment” of park resources. This enjoyment is meant broadly to include people who visit parks as well as those who derive benefit from simply knowing that our national parks exist. The courts have time and again interpreted the Organic Act as holding conservation of park resources preeminent over enjoyment of them; visitor use must not cause impairment of park resources and values.

Congress provided the National Park Service with the discretion to manage national parks, but limited that discretion by the requirements of the Organic Act that park resources and values be left “unimpaired” for future generations. This duty to avoid impairment establishes the primary responsibility of the National Park Service. “The impairment of park resources and values may not be allowed by the Service unless directly and specifically provided for by legislation or by the proclamation establishing the park.” (NPS Management Policies at 1.4.4). The Park Service has an affirmative duty to prevent degradation of park resources and values. “NPS managers must always seek ways to avoid, or to minimize to the greatest degree practicable, adverse impacts on park resources and values.” (NPS Management Policies at 1.4.3)

Impairment is an impact which affects a resource or value that is “necessary to fulfill specific purposes” identified in formation of the park or “key to the natural and cultural integrity of the park or to opportunities for enjoyment of the park”. (NPS Management Policies at 1.4.5). The “park resources and values” that fall under the impairment standard include scenery, wildlife, natural soundscapes and smell, and all natural process and features. Also not to be impaired is “the park’s role in contributing to the national dignity, the high public value and integrity, and the superlative environmental quality of the national park system, and the benefit and inspiration provided to the American people by the national park system.” (NPS Management Policies at 1.4.6).

B. NPS Regulations Are Protective and Presumptive Against Snowmobiles

Snowmobiles are generally prohibited in national parks except when “their use is consistent with the park’s natural, cultural, scenic and aesthetic values, safety considerations, park management objectives, and will not disturb wildlife or damage park resources.” (36 CFR 2.18(c))

Furthermore, even where such use may be consistent with Park Service regulations, the Park Service determined that, given the inevitable adverse impacts of these machines, if “equally desirable [snowmobiling] opportunities exist on adjacent lands,” then “snowmobile use is more appropriate on the adjacent lands which do not have the specific preservation mandate of the National Park Service.” (44 Fed. Reg. 47,413 (1979)).

There are millions of acres of other nearby public lands available for recreational snowmobiling outside of designated Wilderness and National Parks. In fact, the allocation of winter recreational opportunities in the region unfairly and disproportionately favors motorized recreationists over those seeking a quiet recreational experience, and could result in unacceptable environmental harm. For example, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources studied snowmobile access in an area covering 34.3 million acres of federal and state lands in Southcentral Alaska and concluded that about 32.8 million acres—over 95% of the total area—are open to snowmobile use. This study specifically excluded Denali National Park. These lands are generally accessible by highway to major population centers in the state, including Anchorage.

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The RDEIS acknowledges that quality recreation snowmobile terrain is available outside the Park yet the RDEIS fails to explain why millions of acres of accessible terrain is not enough to satisfy this interest. Furthermore the RDEIS fails to reconcile this decision with the direction in 44 Fed. Reg. 47,413 (1979).

C. NPS Regulations Are Protective and Presumptive Against All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs)

The National Park Service generally considers ORV use to be incompatible with purposes and values in Denali National Park and Preserve. The RDEIS clearly articulates NPS policy. “The use of ORVs is generally prohibited throughout the national park and preserve consistent with existing regulations (36 CFR 4.10, 43 CFR 36.11, EO 11644 and 1986 *General Management Plan*.). ORV use can occur on state right of ways and has been authorized in the past. ORVs are not authorized for subsistence purposes under ANILCA 811 because they were not traditionally employed for subsistence purposes” (RDEIS p.459).

The RDEIS did not further address ORV use in Denali. However, we are aware of the on-going effort to review subsistence ORV use in and around Cantwell. The FEIS needs to recognize that there is a process for changing the GMP’s no-subsistence use position through a separate “Finding” process, such as the effort in the Cantwell Area. That recognition in the FEIS needs to clearly state that any change to the ORV prohibition will only come about through a determination that shows such use is well established over a long period of time, is multi-generational, and that historically documented community-wide subsistence ORV use occurred on the trail(s) in question prior to the enactment of ANILCA. If a determination is issued, the subsequent subsistence ORV use is subject to reasonable regulation necessary to prevent waste or damage to fish, wildlife, terrain, and other Park resources or values and in such a matter as to prevent the harassment, hazing, or herding of wildlife. Subsistence ORV use should be managed under a permit system and only allowed on designated trails. Until a final determination is made in the Cantwell Area, the RDEIS is clear that subsistence ORV use is not allowed in the park.

1

D. Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 Prohibit Adverse Snowmobile and ATV Impacts

In the 1970s, with off-road vehicles causing increasing damage to public lands across the nation, Presidents Nixon and Carter signed Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 (respectively). The first required that the Park Service:

ensure that the use of off-road vehicles on public lands will be controlled and directed so as to protect the resources of these lands...

Executive Order 11644, issued in 1972, directs agency officials to specify, through regulation, the areas and trails on public lands on which ORV use will be permitted. Those areas where ORV use is permitted will be based on, among other things, “the protection of the resources of the public lands,” *Id* at §3(a), and shall “be located to minimize harassment of wildlife or significant disruption of wildlife habitats.” *Id* at §3 (a) (2). Within national parks, such trails shall only be designated “if the respective agency head determines that off-road vehicle use in such locations will not adversely affect their natural, aesthetic, or scenic values.” *Id* at §4. The EO also requires agencies to establish a mechanism to monitor ORV use and impacts and to respond appropriately to such information. *Id* at §8.

In 1977, EO 11644 was amended by EO 11989. The second order directed that when the Park Service determines:

that the use of off-road vehicles will cause or is causing considerable adverse effects on the soil, vegetation, wildlife, wildlife habitat or cultural or historic resources of particular areas or trails of the public lands[it shall] immediately close such areas or trails to the type of off-road vehicle causing such effects...(EO 11989 42 Fed. Reg 26959(1977) reprinted in 42 U.S.C. §4321).

E. Recreation vs. Transportation in Parks: A Critical Distinction Upheld by Courts

NPS policy on use of motorized equipment requires that “Where such use is necessary and appropriate, the least impacting equipment, vehicles, and transportation systems should be used...” (NPS Management Policies at 8.2.3). As a transportation system for the parks, snowmobiles clearly fail to meet policy standards. And as a form of recreation, the law is as clear: damaging forms of recreation have no place in national parks.

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See NPCA-18.

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The District Court of Utah recently clarified that the Park Service is not in the business to provide recreational opportunities if those recreational pursuits contravene NPS policy and the Organic Act. Protection of the resource comes first and all visitor access must be in harmony with preservation. (*Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance v. Dabney* (1998 WL 703956 (D. Utah)). At issue was the ‘right’ of four-wheel drive enthusiasts to recreate in sensitive riparian areas in Canyonlands National Park. The Court based its decision to deny continued access on the Organic Act.

The relevant provision of the Organic Act provides that the Park Service is to “regulate the use of” national parks by means that conform to their “fundamental purpose”, namely: “to conserve the scenery and natural historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations”. (Organic Act (16 U.S.C. §1a-1).

The Court went on to clarify the oft-cited Organic Act notion of “visitor enjoyment”: user groups attempt to broaden the concept of “visitor enjoyment” to denote a right to recreate in or access the parks in any way seen fit. The Court disagreed. “[V]isitor enjoyment” as used in the statute refers to visitor enjoyment of park scenery, wildlife, and natural and historic objects that are to be preserved. As used in this sense, visitor enjoyment does not refer to visitor enjoyment of outdoor recreational activities. Opportunities for outdoor recreation are provided on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service....[G]iven...the availability of less-invasive forms of access, permanent impairment...in order to permit the continued use [of four wheel drive vehicles in Salt Creek Canyon] cannot be reconciled with the Organic Act’s overarching goal of resource protection.” (*Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance v. Dabney* (1998 WL 703956 (D. Utah)).

Even if NPS continues to try to rationalize that snowmachines are merely a form of “access to wilderness recreation”, the agency never analyzed alternative winter transportation options i.e. snowcoaches and/or airplanes. Without that analysis NPS violates management policy 1.4, which requires NPS to determine the most reasonable alternative.

2

F. NPS Policy Requires Highest Protection and Restoration of National Parks

NPS Management Policies of 2001 cover all of the impact areas addressed in the RDEIS. The “General Management Concepts” of the policies build upon the overarching policy that “preserving park resources and values unimpaired is the core, or primary, responsibility of NPS managers.” (NPS Policies at 4.1). To fulfill this primary responsibility, it is necessary that “[i]n cases of doubt as to the impacts of activities on park natural resources, the Service will decide in favor of protecting the natural resources.” (NPS Policies at 4.1). Moreover, NPS is directed to go beyond protection to restore natural systems. “The Service will seek to return human-disturbed areas to the natural conditions and processes characteristic of the ecological zone in which the damaged resources are situated.” (NPS Policies at 4.1.5). This restoration may be accomplished through means such as “restoration of natural soundscapes”. (NPS Policies at 4.1.5).

III. New RDEIS Management Framework a Risk to Park Resources

Pursuant to its Organic Act, the Park Service must manage Denali National Park and Preserve so as to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them *unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.*” 16 U.S.C. §1 (emphasis added). This preservation mandate is further enforced by the Redwood Act amendments to the Organic Act. This mandate is consistent with Section 202(3)(a) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). Section 203 of ANILCA expressly directs the Park Service to manage new and redesignated units of the park system in accordance with the Organic Act.

The Park Service must recognize that while it may have the discretion to choose the most appropriate tool or mechanism to achieve its desired future resource and social conditions for a particular area, it must adhere to its Congressionally mandated duty to manage the park in a way that ensures its scenery, natural and historic objects, and wildlife will be preserved and left *unimpaired* for the enjoyment of future generations. Park managers must act to *prevent* impairment of park resources.

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TWS-2

There is an important distinction between the preferred alternative in the *Revised Draft EIS* and the preferred alternative in the original draft. In the original draft plan, the National Park Service proposed a special regulation to open portions of the park additions and preserve to recreational snowmachine use. In the *Revised Draft EIS* and *Final EIS*, the National Park Service proposes no such authorization. Snowmachine use that occurs is assumed to be only for “traditional activities,” village-to-village travel, and subsistence purposes, although a very limited provision is included to provide for recreational snowmachine access on winter season corridors if wilderness designation occurs in the future. The use of snowcoaches for winter recreation access was considered and dismissed as an alternative in the *Revised Draft EIS*, p.79. Air taxis would continue to provide winter access in the park additions and preserve in the modified preferred alternative.

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While the concept of designing management plans based on “desired future conditions” allows the Park Service access to a broad array of tools to prevent impairment of park resources, the use of these tools is necessarily dependent on comprehensive monitoring and enforcement. Without the proper funding for such monitoring and enforcement, the Park Service will be ill-equipped to prevent impairment to park resources or to even assess the levels of impairment. In an era where the Park Service is struggling to secure funding for even basic operational expenses, it does not seem wise to tie the success of an entire management plan to such drastic funding increases.

The Environmental Protection Agency raised significant concerns with the management approach in the February 2003 DEIS which was even more prescriptive than the framework in this RDEIS. “Once the precedent for broader snowmachine use is established, it may be difficult to eliminate or even curtail it later, even if environmental impacts prove significant or conflicts between subsistence use and recreational use become more common....We are concerned with the approach because under the proposed plan, protection of environmental resources in the Park additions from snowmobiles would rely heavily on enforcement and monitoring (RDEIS, p. 472).

We feel this proposed approach, if not properly implemented with full funding, will lead to impairment of park resources by providing too much flexibility to political influences that would question identified impacts with a desire for “more study” and would weaken or postpone management actions necessary to protect impacted resources. Critical to this whole management approach is timely identification of real or probable changes or impacts to Desired Future Conditions with enough support so that clear and decisive management action can be taken in a timely manner so as to protect park resources. Park Superintendents must be given the authority to take action when they see or anticipate a problem.

3

Allowing the Superintendent to take action based on what he/she sees or anticipates as impacts to Desired Future Conditions is critical to the success of this management approach. The plan must be clear that both the authority to monitor and the authority to take action lies with the Superintendent. The plan must be clear that if a Superintendent anticipates that an action could or will cause impairment, they are empowered to act **BEFORE** damage occurs to control or restrict a harmful recreational activity. Anticipating and preventing damage to park resources is more important than reacting to impairment once it starts to occur. The Superintendent must be able to take action as he/she sees fit to respond to actions that are impairing park resources or that **COULD** impair park resources. Should there be any question of the impact level, the plan must also provide the Superintendent with the direction to err on the side of caution.

Unlike much of the world, Denali National Park and Preserve sustains a vast functioning ecosystem. That ecosystem functions because of 89 years of strict protective measures taken by the National Park Service. Ecosystems can be significantly modified by human actions, often to the detriment of that ecosystem's sustainability. The cost of rebuilding or rehabilitating an impacted ecosystem is oftentimes staggering. At Denali we have done it right the first time, so far. Aldo Leopold said that the first rule of tinkering is not to throw away all the pieces. We have the pieces at Denali and to sustain and perpetuate that functioning ecosystem, the Superintendent must be given the authority to err on the side of the conservative. If he/she later finds that a rule, regulation, or emergency order was too strict, it can be loosened. If is virtually impossible to take an action that is too permissive, and damaging to the resource, and tighten it up. Caution is the key word and the plan must be explicit in its direction to embrace the precautionary principle.

One only has to look at the complete failure of this management approach in Yellowstone National Park to understand why this is not a solution for Denali. In the 1990's the level of recreational snowmachine use spiraled out of control. The Park Service crashed through its target maximum threshold in the second year of a ten year winter use management plan but the Park Service lacked the political will to effectively implement the necessary tools to prevent impairment. At the end of the day, despite good intentions, the management framework failed dramatically to protect Park Resources and Park employees.

A. Monitoring Plan Must Be in Place Prior to Signing the Record of Decision

The Achilles Heel to this whole plan is the monitoring program. In times of limited funds, we are very concerned that funding for the monitoring necessary to properly implement this plan simply will not be available, leaving wilderness, wildlife, solitude, natural quiet and other park resources at risk. Key among

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See NPCA-1 and PfP-4.

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these impacts are those from recreational snowmobiling, an activity that the NPS preferred alternative says can occur in the four million acres added to the park in 1980.

We ask that the Park Service not implement this plan until a monitoring program is fully developed in partnership with the public, including formation of a Citizens Advisory Committee, and fully funded in the operating budget of the park. Major details of and a specific implementation timeline for the monitoring program should be included in the FEIS and the Record of Decision (ROD), as discussed in Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) "Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning CEQ's NEPA Regulations. Question 34c states, in part, that "the discussion of mitigation and monitoring in a Record of Decision must be more detailed than a general statement that mitigation is being required." Detail, which is lacking in the RDEIS, must be included in FEIS and the ROD.

The FEIS and ROD must also discuss the necessary funding for the monitoring plan. Will there be new funding made available to implement the monitoring program? If no new funds are made available, how does the Park Service propose to monitor its Desired Future Conditions with existing staff that is already overloaded with work? We endorse the idea of an Advisory Committee to assist with developing and implementing the monitoring program.

As the Superintendent monitors the Desired Future Conditions, there must be clear standards and indicators for when those conditions are met or exceeded. Key to monitoring these standards and identifying any changes in the indicators is a solid understanding and documentation of existing conditions and, better yet, conditions as they were when ANILCA passed. The discussion of standards and monitoring in the Actions Common section do reference "existing data." That data should be in this plan. We find it impossible to determine if we can endorse or support the standards established in the plan without any data showing how these proposed standards relate to what is actually happening on the ground right now or, better yet, during the time since ANILCA passed. There very much needs to be baseline data against which to measure the efficacy of these proposed standards. We are concerned that the extent of existing baseline data is not sufficient to support a monitoring program that can withstand scrutiny from those that will oppose any restrictions or closures. Are existing conditions already exceeding the standards?

The methodology for measuring change over time for those standards that include encounters with people or human disturbance relies on a visitor survey conducted every five years. Where did five years come from? That seems too long a time period. There can be significant shifts in recreational visitation, with resulting potential impacts to park resources, in only one year (12.3% increase from 2003 to 2004), what could happen if there was this much increase in each of five years without any monitoring by NPS? Backcountry camping has changed as much as 25% (1993 to 1994) in one year, though shifts in the 10%/year range are more common. Still, if we increased 10%/year over 5 years, NPS would be looking at a 50% increase.

As the visitor survey seems to be the primary tool by which you are basing your monitoring plan, we suggest that all survey data collection be done on an annual basis for at least the first five years after which adjustments can be made for a longer time period if it can be shown a longer time period will impact the quality of data needed track changes to the backcountry conditions that make Denali such a desirable place to visit.

For changes in physical conditions to trails and campsites you only cite "field observations" to describe how these will be monitored. The plan needs to include much more information about these "field observations," such as who is making these observations? How often are they made? Weekly? Monthly? Seasonally? What form will this data be collected so that it can withstand the scrutiny it undoubtedly will receive when it is used by park managers to seek restrictions or closures based on resource impairment? There must be a rigorous data collection plan so that all data is uniformly observed, cataloged, and evaluated so it CAN withstand such scrutiny.

B. RDEIS Soundscape Plan Illustrates Failure of Management Framework

The RDEIS acknowledges that natural sounds are "inherent components of the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wild life" protected by the NPS Organic Act," and the Park Service must "protect and

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See Pfp-4, DCC-32, and NPCA-8.

TWS-5

See NPCA-9.

TWS-6

Clear indicators and standards are presented in Tables 2-1 to 2-9 and associated text. Data that the National Park Service presently has is presented in the plan, either in Chapter 3: Affected Environment or Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences (for example, see the "Natural Sounds" sections of both chapters and the Visitor Use section of chapter 3). The National Park Service recognizes that it would be desirable to have more extensive data that describe current conditions. However, as articulated in the answer to AOPA-1 the National Park Service can and should develop provisional standards in the absence of complete data. The desired conditions described provide for a high level of resource protection.

TWS-7

See NPCA-5.

TWS-8

The Monitoring section of Table 2-2 provides a three-tiered approach to monitoring trail and campsite disturbance impacts, including specific variables, a system for determining locations to be monitored, and a monitoring frequency. Additional detail would be developed during implementation, and would rely on rigorous scientific methodology. Much of the monitoring of these impacts would be accomplished in conjunction with existing vegetation monitoring that takes place as part of the Central Alaska Network's Vital Signs program, and would require little added expense. See also Pfp-4.

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restore natural soundscapes as it would any natural resource of the parks" (RDEIS p.133). Despite this recognition that the National Park Service is obligated pursuant to the Organic Act to protect and preserve natural soundscapes as a park resource, the RDEIS fails to meet this mandate by arbitrarily allowing significant impacts to natural soundscapes.

An inherent flaw in the soundscape plan, and one present throughout the Environmental Consequences Analysis, is the use of the no-action alternative as a baseline for measuring the impacts of the action alternatives. Such comparisons result in unacceptably high impacts. While the RDEIS recognizes these cumulative impacts to the natural soundscape, they are summarily and arbitrarily dismissed in each action alternative.

This arbitrary approval of significant impacts is perhaps best illustrated by the establishment of "high" and "very high" threshold levels in the action alternatives. Such thresholds permit substantial impacts to the natural soundscape and are a violation of the Park Service's nonimpairment mandate under the Organic Act. Additionally, the RDEIS recognizes that the established threshold levels, as applied under the various action alternatives, will often be exceeded at the very outset of implementation.

The RDEIS fails to address what actions, if any, will be undertaken to prevent the impacts associated by these threshold violations, or when such actions will be initiated. This is exacerbated by the lack of a detailed monitoring and enforcement plan. These threshold violations, as well as the lack of adequate mitigation to address the accompanying impacts, violate the Organic Act.

The RDEIS soundscape plan fails to meet the agency's statutory and regulatory mandates. The Park Service must develop a stronger Soundscape Preservation and Noise Management Plan prior to adopting a preferred alternative that prevents impacts to park resources.

C. NPS Must Complete a Wilderness Management Plan

Wilderness Plans and Backcountry Plans are not equivalent documents. NPS Management Policies state that all parks with wilderness resources must have wilderness plans or equivalent documents. In order for a backcountry plan to be an "equivalent document" it must contain the area specific objectives and prescriptions needed to maintain wilderness qualities and attributes. The RDEIS encompasses both wilderness and non-wilderness resources and as such is not focused adequately on protecting the area's unique wilderness qualities.

The Wilderness Act is different than the NPS Organic Act and as such dictates a different management regime. Wilderness resources are distinct from other NPS backcountry resources and to maintain their unique qualities that qualify them as wilderness or potential wilderness they need to be managed as distinct areas within the NPS. Further, "as wilderness is a composite resource with interrelated parts, its management must be focused on the whole, comprehensively not on its component parts. For wilderness, therefore, one should not develop separate management plans for vegetation, wildlife or recreation [or fire]. Rather, one plan must deal address comprehensively with the interrelationships between these and all other component parts of the wilderness resource [Hendee and Dawson 2002, p. 193].

Wilderness management is a struggle to maintain the qualities and attributes of an area that led to its being identified as having wilderness potential, or to its designation as Wilderness. These conditions are, as stated in the Wilderness Act. A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are *untrammelled by man*, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land *retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation*, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) *generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable*; (2) *has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation*; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.¹⁶ U.S.C. § 1131(c)(emphasis added).

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TWS-9

This comment inaccurately characterizes the National Park Service environmental impact analysis. For natural soundscapes, as for other resources, each analysis identifies the impacts that have occurred or are likely to occur outside of the scope of plan actions, identifies the impacts that would be caused by the actions proposed in the plan, and then identifies the cumulative effects of the actions in the plan plus the other past, present, and future actions. The no-action alternative is provided for comparative purpose, but in no way serves as a "baseline" for evaluating impacts. The National Park Service does, however, indicate when the actions in the plan change from current conditions, and indicate when current conditions are adversely affected under existing use. Thus, in the preferred alternative it is correct to assert that the natural soundscape of the park has a major cumulative adverse impact from motorized access (primarily airplanes, most of which never enter NPS's regulatory jurisdiction), while at the same time concluding that the actions in the preferred alternative would result in negligible additional adverse impacts to the existing cumulative impacts. The final conclusion states that there are ongoing major adverse cumulative impacts, which this action does not correct.

The establishment of "high" and "very high" standards for natural sound disturbance is not arbitrary, but calculated to allow higher levels of motorized access in some areas of the park and preserve while minimizing the geographic extent of highly impacted areas. This focuses high levels of disturbance in just two particular areas to serve explicit park purposes (see NPCA-16). As a result, the National Park Service believes that the non-impairment standard articulated in the introduction to Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences is met. The high level of protection afforded the natural soundscape over 94% of the park and preserve and the limits placed on soundscape degradation over the remaining 6% of the park and preserve seem adequate to claim that the natural sound resource would continue to "fulfill the specific purposes identified in the park's establishing legislation" and "its role in maintaining the natural integrity of the park."

TWS-10

The preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* and the modified preferred alternative in the *Final EIS* clearly express the tools that the National Park Service has available to respond if thresholds (standards) are approached. As described above, the National Park Service is fully able to take proactive action to respond to changes in visitor use if it believes the standards would be exceeded in the future; the agency does not have to wait

response continued next page

Comments

Management by reaction works against wilderness preservation goals because management direction can easily be shaped by a succession of minor decisions. The cumulative results of such decisions may be undesirable and hard to reverse in wilderness. Unplanned management can be recognized by a shifting of focus from problem to problem, inconsistent, conflicting actions, and a loss of overall direction towards wilderness preservation goals. [Hendee and Dawson 2002, p. 210.]

IV. SNOWMOBILES IMPAIR PARK RESOURCE AND VALUES SNOWMOBILES VIOLATE NPS GUIDING LAW, REGULATION, AND POLICY

A. NPS Issues June 2000 Finding that Snowmobiles Impact Resource Values in the Old Park

For over two years, the Park Service analyzed the published literature related to snowmobile impacts and applied those studies to examine the impacts on the resource values of the Old Park should snowmobile use be allowed there. In June 2000, the Park Service published a “Statement of Finding, Permanent Closure” that analyzed and discussed a number of key issues, including:

- the detrimental effects that snowmobiles would have on wildlife, vegetation, soils, and air and water quality of the Old Park;
- the degradation of the pristine air and water quality within the Old Park that would be caused by snowmobile use there;
- the conflicts that snowmobile use in the Old park would create with historically-occurring recreational uses and resource values;
- the interference snowmobiles can present to subsistence opportunities on nearby state and federal lands.

In the June 2000 “Statement of Finding, Permanent Closure” the Park Service found that snowmobiles in the Old park would cause wildlife to abandon Old Park habitat, alter historic predator-prey relationships, and directly harm individual animals through intentional harassment by snowmobile riders. The Park Service also found that snowmobiles would diminish the Old Park’s pristine air and water quality, help create permanent trails, and damage vegetation. Finally, the Park Service found that snowmobiles would degrade the experience of visitors to the Old Park year-round by leaving visible trails across the tundra and shattering the natural soundscape over large geographical areas.

These studies represented the culmination of three years of public involvement and Park Service study. In the end, over 300 Alaskans testified at public meetings, and over 7,400 people submitted public comments on the proposed regulatory closure of Old Denali.

B. NPS Acknowledges that New Park Resource Values are the Same as Old Park Resource Values

The RDEIS acknowledges that the values of the lands determined suitable for wilderness designation in the New Park are the same as the values in the Old Park. The level of proposed motorized recreation and motorized access in the preferred alternative far surpass the level of motorized activity considered detrimental in the NPS. “Statement of Finding, Permanent Closure,” June 2000. Furthermore, under Section 1110(a) of ANILCA, as well as other laws, NPS has a responsibility to ensure that any new activity or change in existing activities does not have a detrimental effect on resource values. Section 1110(a) provides for closure by the Secretary of the Interior if use “would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area.” Thus, in meeting its responsibilities, NPS need not wait for actual physical damage to occur before taking protective action to prevent degradation to wildlife and other natural resources. In light of these facts, the RDEIS fails to adequately justify a non-impairment finding.

C. The Park Service Should Not Change Existing Law to Authorize Snowmachine Use in Denali

There are currently only four ways that the Park Service may potentially authorize snowmachine use in national parks: 1) on specific routes that have been designated by special regulation (36 C.F.R. §2.18); 2) for the continuation of certain traditional activities, subject to reasonable regulation (16 U.S.C. §3170(a), 43 C.F.R. §36.11); 3) for subsistence, where appropriate and subject to reasonable regulation (16 U.S.C. § 3121, 36 C.F.R. §13.46); and for access to an inholding, following application for and issuance of a right-of-way permit (16 U.S.C. §3170(b) and 43 C.F.R. §36.10).

Response to Comments

for damage to occur. A detailed monitoring plan is an implementation level step, and the guidance given for monitoring is sufficient for a general management plan document.

TWS-11

See NPCA-20.

TWS-12

Although the wilderness resource values of the park and preserve addition lands are the same as those of the designated wilderness of the Old Park, the National Park Service believes there is a distinction between the two when determining detriment. As pointed out in the 2000 *Environmental Assessment for Permanent Closure of the Former Mount McKinley National Park to Snowmachine Use*, the Old Park was closed to snowmachine use prior to ANILCA. Thus, there was no existing pattern of use in the Old Park. That EA also provided evidence that the Old Park was inadvertently included within the special access provisions of ANILCA, and that the inclusion had not been intended by Congress. By contrast, Congress clearly did intend that some level of snowmachine use continue in the park additions, including that permitted by ANILCA section 811(b) for subsistence purposes and by 1110(a) for traditional activities and travel to and from villages and homesites. So while the wilderness resource values are the same for the Denali Wilderness and the park and preserve additions, the standard for detriment is different.

The analysis in this *Final EIS* demonstrates that snowmachine use would not cause impairment under the modified preferred alternative.

Comments

Before the Park Service may authorize snowmachine corridors or designated routes, the agency would be required to promulgate special regulations setting out such routes. 36 C.F.R. §2.18. This would only be possible if the Park Service concluded that snowmachine use was consistent with the park's natural, cultural, scenic, and aesthetic values, safety considerations, park management objectives, and that it would not disturb wildlife or damage park resources. *Id.* at §2.18(c). We do not support such regulatory designations in the Denali Additions.

Before the Park Service may authorize dispersed snowmachine use for recreational purposes, the Park Service would need to promulgate new regulatory authority. To do so would represent a relaxation of the mandates in 36 C.F.R. §2.18, which we feel would be inappropriate. While such a relaxation may perhaps be authorized under 36 C.F.R. 1.2(c), we feel that this course would be ill-advised due to the detrimental impacts that dispersed snowmachine use would have on a number of resources of the Park.

In addition, for NPS to guarantee recreational snowmachine use on a par with the guaranteed use of snowmachines for traditional activities under Section 1110(a), a change to ANILCA would be required. We do not support any such changes. We recommend against adoption any of these types of regulatory or statutory changes to allow snowmachine use in Denali to occur, or taking any actions in the Plan that would require their adoption.

D. NPS Must Adopt the Old Park "Traditional Activities" Definition for the New Park

The Park Service recognizes throughout the RDIES that snowmachine use -- including purely recreational use -- has grown in the New Park in ways that were not foreseen or planned for by the agency. All of this expanded snowmachine use -- both current and prospective -- appears to be illegal: it is not occurring on routes designated by special regulations pursuant to 36 C.F.R. §2.18, and it is not for subsistence or for a traditional activity for which Congress meant to preserve access. The "no action" alternative is consistently held up as an example of what NOT to do, because of its reactionary posture and the resulting environmental impacts.

The Park Service repeatedly shuns the "hands-off" approach taken in the past as exemplified by the "no action" alternative, yet it refuses to proactively define "traditional activities" for the New Park and limit the uses occurring there accordingly. The NPS should not allow the existing pattern of laissez-faire management to continue. .

It should be noted that in adopting a definition for the New Park, the Park Service may not include purely recreational pursuits among those traditional activities for which Congress preserved access in Section 1110(a). Purely recreational activities were simply not meant to be included in "traditional activities" in Section 1110(a). While it may have made sense to apply a definition to the New Park in a process separate from the Old Park due to their unique management histories, it is only the *application* that should be different -- the definition should stay the same. Congress in Section 1110(a) meant to preserve access for a limited universe of activities -- not including recreation. In our thorough review of the legislative history we have found no evidence to the contrary, and in the multiple rounds of federal court litigation, those urging such an expanded definition have pointed to none. Surely, in all of the legislative history, Congress would have said so if that was what it intended. But it did not.

Those advocating for including recreational snowmachining in the definition of "traditional activities" are attempting to create an exception that would overwhelm the rule. Section 1110(a) is titled "special access," and that is just what it provides -- special access that accommodates the unique rural Alaska lifestyle in which individuals use federal lands for utilitarian, consumptive activities. Section 1110(a) represents the balance in ANILCA between, on the one hand, preservation and protection of conservation lands and, on the other hand, preservation and protection of access to such lands for traditional activities. Inclusion of recreational snowmachining in the definition of "traditional activities" would upset this delicate balance and be contrary to the intent of ANILCA.

This need to prohibit expanding illegal recreational snowmachine use is based not only on NPS regulations but also on the mandates of the NPS Organic Act and its implementing regulations. Snowmachines have been widely acknowledged to have significant impacts on wildlife, air and water quality, vegetation and

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TWS-13

Neither the preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* nor the modified preferred alternative of the *Final EIS* authorize recreational snowmachining in the park additions or preserve. See TWS-2, PfP-5, TWS-16.

Snowmachine use that occurs legally in Denali is either for traditional activities or travel to and from villages and homesites (ANILCA 1110(a), 43 CFR § 36.11(c)) or for subsistence purposes (ANILCA 811(b), 36 CFR § 13.46(a)). The "Corridors" that could be designated under the modified preferred alternative are not intended as snowmachine routes under 36 CFR §2.18. These are management area designations that allow higher levels of use than the surrounding area, but they provide no additional authorization for snowmachine access. The modified preferred alternative does suggest that in the event of future wilderness designation these winter season Corridors could provide routes for recreational snowmachine access.

TWS-14

See PfP-5.

Comments

soils, wetlands, and Wilderness values and users. See NPS, “Statement of Finding: Permanent Closure of the Former Mt. McKinley National Park,” June 2000; NPS, “Environmental Assessment for Proposed Permanent Closure,” Nov. 1999.

The Park Service analyzed and documented these impacts in the Environmental Assessment and Statement of Finding for the permanent closure of the Old Park to snowmachine use. In those documents, the Park Service found that the use of snowmachines in the Old Park would have a detrimental impact on the myriad resource values found there. The agency found that Section 1110(a) of ANILCA, as well as other laws, imposed a responsibility “to ensure that any new activity or change in existing activities does not have a detrimental effect on resource values.” NPS EA at 27. The Park Service also found that it must close an area if a use “would be detrimental to the resource values” of an area, and that “in meeting its responsibilities, NPS need not wait for actual physical damage to occur before taking protective action to prevent degradation to wildlife and other natural resources.” Id.

In the RDEIS the Park Service acknowledges that “the values of lands determined suitable for wilderness designation in the park additions are the same as the Old Park. Thus the Park Service’s allowance of snowmachines in the vast majority of the additions that were identified as suitable for Wilderness designation is contrary to law, since it will cause detrimental impacts to resource values. The Park Service must prevent these snowmachine impacts to resource values before they occur. If they are allowed to occur, they will constitute an impairment of the resource values of the affected Park and Preserve.

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In the RDEIS the Park Service acknowledges these widespread and serious impacts from snowmachine use, yet it authorizes snowmachining and thereby does not prevent the impacts. The Park Service must maintain the scenery and natural environment of Denali National Park and Preserve unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations, and cannot allow any permanent damage to park resources. 16 U.S.C. §1. The direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts from expanded snowmachine use rise to the level of impairment.

E. ANILCA 202(3) Provides for Reasonable not Unlimited or Unregulated access

When applying the purposes expressed in Section 202 of ANILCA, we urge the Park Service to give effect to each word and to view the provisions in context with the other laws and provisions that remain applicable to Denali -- the NPS Organic Act, the Wilderness Act, NPS regulations and executive orders, and NPS Management Policies. Only by doing so can the Park Service fully implement the will of Congress to protect this wild and undeveloped Park.

In applying the legislative mandates applicable to Denali National Park and Preserve expressed in Section 202(3), the Park Service should view access provisions in context with the other purposes for which the Park was set aside. For instance, when considering the direction to provide “reasonable access” for “wilderness recreational activities,” we urge the Park Service to view this in conjunction with its mandate to maintain the habitat for and populations of fish and wildlife. Park Service studies have clearly established that snowmachine use damages wildlife habitat by altering vegetative cover, as well as harming wildlife populations by changing distribution patterns due to harassment and creation of artificial travel corridors. When considering any potential mode of access for a wilderness recreation activity, the Park Service must test them against these equally-important Congressional mandates.

Congress provided for “reasonable access” for wilderness recreational activities. This shows an intent by Congress to limit the universe of potentially-permissible modes of access. For instance, any mode of access that would degrade Park values, impact fish and wildlife habitat or populations, or that would impact solitude or scenic beauty would necessarily be unreasonable. When considering any means of access for any “wilderness recreational” activity, the Park Service should first evaluate whether that means of access is indeed “reasonable” given the purposes for which the area was set aside, keeping in mind that what may be reasonable in some areas of the country is not reasonable in designated or suitable Wilderness.

The Park Service should be aware that it does not need to permit every possible mode of access in an attempt to provide “reasonable access” for “wilderness recreational activities.” The provision for “reasonable access” is in the general “purposes” discussion for Denali National Park and Preserve, and does not trump the specific provisions of the Wilderness Act that apply to the designated Wilderness (and,

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TWS-15

See above, TWS-12.

TWS-16

The National Park Service agrees that “reasonable access” for wilderness recreational activities does not mean unregulated access, nor does it mean every mode of access must be allowed. The modified preferred alternative does not claim that snowmachines use is allowed in the park additions and preserve to provide such “reasonable access”; snowmachine use is allowed only for traditional activities, subsistence activities, and village-to-village travel (see TWS-13). The plan does suggest that in the event of wilderness designation, the designated winter season Corridors could be used to provide recreational access by snowmachine along the Tokositna River and to the Old Park boundary in the Dunkle Hills area. The National Park Service believes that this type of limited access by snowmachine could be considered reasonable for that portion of the park additions, even if the area were designated wilderness.

Comments

by application of the NPS 2001 Management Policies, all suitable Wilderness) of Denali National Park and Preserve. The Wilderness Act prohibits the introduction of new motorized uses into designated Wilderness. Nothing in ANILCA changes that regime for Denali, where according to the 1986 General Management Plan, the use of snowmachines is "neither traditional nor necessary for wilderness recreational activities." We urge you to reaffirm this position, and to apply it by prohibiting the use of snowmachines in designated Wilderness and suitable Wilderness lands in Denali National Park and Preserve -- even for any alleged "wilderness recreational activity."

We urge the Park Service to apply the "reasonable access" and "wilderness recreational opportunities" provisions in the enabling legislation for Denali National Park and Preserve conservatively, by viewing them in context with the purposes for which the Park was set aside and with other federal-land conservation laws. In declaring the purposes of Denali, Congress simply did not mean to mandate any and all means of access, for any and all outdoor activity. On the contrary, Congress meant to allow people to continue to enjoy this Wilderness park in its wild and pristine state.

V. AIRPLANE LANDINGS and AIRCRAFT OVERFLIGHTS

Growing demand for flightsightseeing tours has dramatically increased air traffic over our nation's National Parks. By some estimates, Denali is second only to the Grand Canyon now as the Park with the most congested airspace. In just ten recent years, from 1991 to 2001, the number of scenic landings on the Ruth Glacier increased more than 800%, from 220 to 1800. In 2002 aircraft were audible in more than 50% (maximum 80%) of the sound monitoring samples collected every five minutes between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. on good weather days in the Ruth Glacier area. Denali Wilderness Program Manager Joe Van Horn was quoted in a 2003 Ned Rozell column in the Daily News as saying: "I think it's probably the most common negative report we get back, other than mosquitoes and rain. I've been here for 23 years and I think the increase in aircraft-related noise is the single biggest change in the park's wilderness character that I've noticed."

The swelling use has increased conflicts with hikers, climbers and local property owners. Natural quiet and the opportunity to hear and enjoy natural sounds are rapidly disappearing on nearly all of Alaska's accessible public lands. Denali is so far no exception, but it ought to be. The Park Service should do whatever it takes to establish meaningful overflight regulations and limits on scenic tour landings. To achieve desired future resource conditions, NPS must adequately address both flight patterns and levels of use.

A. National Park Overflight Act Provides a Valuable Framework

The 1987 National Park Overflight Act provides a valuable framework for restoring natural sounds, reducing wildlife harassment and minimizing visitor conflicts. The Act calls for development of Air Tour Management Plans and recommends a litany of methods for resolving airspace issues. These tools, as well as the guiding principles for their use spelled out in the Act, should provide the foundation for Park Service management direction in Denali

B. RDEIS Provides Inadequate Direction to Reduce Adverse Impacts from Overflights

While the RDEIS recognizes there has been an enormous increase in air tour and transport services throughout Denali National Park and Preserve, the RDEIS fails to outline sufficient steps to reduce the adverse impacts from overflights. The preferred alternative recommends establishing a voluntary Aircraft Overflights Working Group but fails to outline the specifics of how an undefined voluntary working group can help the agency meet its management objectives. In fact the RDEIS does not even mention or include the proposed Flightseeing and Air Taxi Route maps included in the NPS Winter 2001 Edition of the Denali Dispatch.

C. NPS Must Develop Overflight Agreements Prior to Completing the BCMP

NPS must develop interim operating agreements between NPS, FAA and air tour operators prior to completion of the Backcountry Management Plan. Where possible NPS must include incentives and restrictions in air taxi concession permits. Without these agreements in place it is impossible for NPS to accurately assess the environmental consequences of each alternative.

Response to Comments

TWS-17

As a GMP amendment, this planning document focuses on setting goals for the backcountry of Denali, and identifies tools that can be used to meet these goals. During the planning process it was recognized that it was premature to specify particular routes for flightseeing or air taxi use when there was no broader shared understanding of what goals were to be accomplished and when the National Park Service had no authority to regulate airspace. Once the modified preferred alternative goes into effect, the Aircraft Overflights Working Group would address specific methods by which the goals could be accomplished.

TWS-18

There is no requirement or need for the National Park Service to enter into an agreement with FAA over management of air tours prior to completion of the BCMP. Air taxi and scenic tour operators who land in the park do so under a concession contract. A prospectus for a new contract consistent with the terms of the plan would be issued following the Record of Decision. For overflights that do not land, the National Park Service intends for the Aircraft Overflights Working Group to consider a variety of means for achieving desired conditions for the soundscape of the park, including some of the ones mentioned in the comment. Regulation might not be necessary to achieve these goals, but remains an option within the Access Management Tools. The National Park Service believes that the actions proposed in the plan would achieve the goals specified, and therefore believes the environmental analysis accurately reflects the impacts of the alternatives.

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Comments

Identified in the NPS 1995 *Report on Effects of Aircraft Overflights on the National Park System* as important tools to minimize adverse impacts, the following actions should be included in the operating agreements:

- Flight-free zones and flight corridors
- Minimum altitude restrictions over wildlife, visitors (climbers and hikers) and communities
- Natural sound should prevail in the park for the majority of the time
- Helicopters for flightseeing or recreational access should not be allowed

If the FAA can not develop regulations to minimize the adverse impacts of overflights then the Park Service and the public must turn to Congress to ask for Alaska to be included in the National Park Overflight Act.

D. Airplane Landings in New Park

Denali National Park's backcountry zoning and mass transit system serve as role models for the country. These affirmative management tools have enabled the Park Service to achieve desired future conditions while allowing visitor access and enjoyment. Carrying capacities must also be applied to airplane landings in the New Park.

- Mandatory registration should be required for general aviation landings
- Scenic flightseeing trips and glacier landings numbers should be capped.
- Alternative 3 map best reflects the appropriate level of scenic air tour landings
- Scenic air tour glacier landings should not be allowed in Eldridge, Little Switzerland or Ramparts
- Helicopter landings should continue to be prohibited

VI. IMPACTS ANALYSIS IS FLAWED AND INADEQUATE UNDER NEPA

The methodology for determining the environmental consequences for the proposed actions is detailed in the RDEIS on p.211. The impacts are assessed in relation to the baseline conditions existing before any actions are taken under the backcountry plan; in this case, pre-existing conditions are those described in the no action alternative. The baseline conditions described in the no action alternative are misleading and can not serve as the foundation for an adequate NEPA analysis. If the Park Service continues to insist that the agency simply could not monitor and enforce legal levels of use in the no action alternative as a foundation for its impact analysis then that simply further demonstrates the problems with RDEIS' proposed management regime that is solely dependent on an undefined monitoring program. Failure to manage is not the foundation of an impacts analysis.

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In addition, the Park Service arbitrarily applies impact levels and non impairment findings. There is often no direct correlation between the cited research and the associated impact findings. There is often inadequate information and as a result subjective impact findings. There are even direct contradictions within the same impact analysis on particular resources. We urge the Park Service to complete a new analysis in the FEIS. When an adequate impacts analysis is completed, we feel confident that the Park Service will find the preferred alternative causes unnecessary impairment to park resources and subsequently choose a new preferred alternative.

A. Current Illegal Snowmobile Use is Not a Valid Baseline Condition from Which to Measure Consequences

"Recreational snowmachine use is now widespread in the southern park additions and growingly rapidly (RDEIS p. 6)."

Recreational snowmobile use is not legal in Denali National Park and Preserve. The regulation 36 CFR 2.18(c) generally prohibits snowmobiles in national parks except when "their use is consistent with the park's natural, cultural, scenic and aesthetic values, safety considerations, park management objectives, and will not disturb wildlife or damage park resources." In the event a national park does promulgate a rule to allow recreational snowmobiles, 36 CFR 2.18 (c) limits snowmobiles to designated routes or waterways. 36 CFR 2.18(c) applies to all units of the National Park Service and closes all areas to snowmobile use

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Response to Comments

TWS-19

The description on p. 211 of the *Revised Draft EIS* inaccurately characterizes the methodology by which the environmental analysis was conducted. Please see TWS-9 above for a more accurate depiction. Impacts of plan actions are not assessed in comparison to the no-action or any other alternatives. Impacts are simply described and their magnitude assessed, along with the cumulative impacts of the plan actions and all past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions that are outside the scope of the plan.

TWS-20

Because there is no statute or regulation that defines the term "traditional activities" in the park additions and preserve, it is unclear whether snowmachining for recreational purposes is legal under 43 CFR § 36.11(c). While that uncertainty remains, the National Park Service has no mechanism for enforcing other regulatory prohibitions on snowmachine access. Please see also the discussion under PfP-5.

Comments

unless specifically opened by regulation. There has never been a rule promulgated to open Denali National Park to recreational snowmobiles much less dispersed snowmobile use under this authority. The designated Wilderness of Denali has been free of snowmobiles since it was established in 1917 and the NPS June 2000 regulation (65 FR 37863) solidified this long-standing prohibition. Winter access to the New Park for snowmobiles is only allowed for subsistence and traditional activities. Until NPS promulgates a rule to define traditional activities for the New Park or promulgates a rule under 36 CFR 2.18, recreational snowmobile use is not legal in Denali.

The no action alternative should reflect the 1986 *General Management Plan* direction whereby the Park Service has an affirmative management responsibility to prohibit non-traditional recreational snowmobile use is the New Park. References in the RDEIS consistently misrepresent the existing management direction and therefore application of impact levels and subsequent impairment findings is fundamentally flawed. For example:

- The RDEIS asserts opening all 4 million acres of the New Park to snowmobiling in the preferred alternative will provide a benefit to wilderness by lowering the impact level. How can increasing access for snowmobiling only cause negligible impacts to wilderness but in comparison causes major adverse impacts to wilderness in the no action alternative where recreational snowmobile use is not even allowed (RDEIS p.322)? Even if NPS were to argue the existing snowmobile access in the no action alternative is legal certainly the impact level assessment should be similar in the NPS preferred where the agency allows both dispersed use and concentrated corridor use.

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- Similarly, the RDEIS measures soundscape impacts against the existing conditions in the no action alternative. This is contrary to Director Order #41 under which soundscape impacts must be measured against natural ambient sounds- not sounds generated by illegal recreational snowmobile use. The RDEIS claims there will be benefits in the preferred alternative to the natural soundscape even though the preferred alternative allows recreational snowmobile in all 4 million acres of the New Park. How can the park Service claim there are major adverse impacts to the natural soundscape (RDEIS p.286) in the no action alternative but only negligible impacts in the preferred alternative where there is a larger amount of motorized use being allowed? Again even if NPS were to argue the existing snowmobile access in the no action alternative is legal certainly the impact level assessment should be similar and not prejudiced by NPS desired outcome.

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B. Arbitrary application of impacts levels and impairment findings

Throughout the Environmental Consequences section NPS cites existing research that documents significant impacts to resource values fundamental to the purposes of the Park's enabling legislation and the Wilderness Act. Yet NPS consistently dismisses the same science when determining impact levels and impairment findings. For example:

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- Studies indicate that exposure of wildlife to snowmobile use can result in behavioral alteration, habitat avoidance and increased energy expenditures at a time when the animals are under extreme stress. The survival of individual animals depends on the severity of energy expenditures (RDEIS p.275). Yet in the preferred alternative where all 4 million acres of the New Park are open to snowmobile use, NPS determines overall impacts to wildlife will be minor to moderate (RDEIS p.274). The adverse impacts to wildlife are not moderate or temporary when increased energy expenditures decrease chances of survival.
- Studies indicate that one mere passing of a snowmobile can permanently damage to vegetation 78% of the time (RDEIS p.232). NPS further cites visual assessments of adverse impacts to vegetation already occurring in Denali including broken shrubs, stripped bark and trail development. How does the preferred alternative allowing snowmobile use in 4 of the 6 million acres of the park only constitute moderate impact level to only 11% of the Park?

Even when the RDEIS does allow impacts to reach the highest impact level (major) in the preferred alternative the action, the Park Service fails to find impairment to the resources that fulfill the purposes identified in the enabling legislation of the Park. These direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts are affecting the very resources and values for which the Park was established. For example:

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TWS-21

The preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* and the modified preferred alternative of the *Final EIS* do not include a change that would open the park additions and preserve to recreational snowmachining. Snowmachine use for undefined traditional activities would continue as in the no-action alternative. However, the modified preferred alternative does contain provisions that would keep impacts to natural sound, vegetation, and wilderness resource values from snowmachine use for traditional or subsistence activities (or any other access mode) to acceptable levels. Defining those limits and creating a management plan for addressing resource harm are the reason that the preferred alternative had many fewer impacts than the no-action alternative, in which no such management plan is in place.

TWS-22

The impact analysis of the *Revised Draft EIS* does not measure soundscape impacts against “existing conditions in the no action alternative.” It identifies impacts of the actions in each alternative, and the cumulative effects. The adverse impacts are much greater in the no-action alternative for the reasons cited above in TWS-21. See also TWS-9.

TWS-23

The adverse impacts associated with snowmachine use in the park are of great concern to the National Park Service, as documented in the *Revised Draft EIS* and *Final EIS*. However, the environmental analysis appropriately uses the research information available to reach conclusions about the likely impacts. Although snowmachines could be used for traditional activities throughout the park additions, they are not likely to be used everywhere. For example, a significant portion of the acreage is composed of inaccessible glaciers and mountains. In non-glaciated areas there are many places that snowmachines are unlikely to access, and even fewer where they are likely to be used intensively (such as the Tokositna valley and the Dunkle Hills/Broad Pass area). Management area standards for trail disturbance and wildlife would provide a mechanism for taking management action in these areas if thresholds are approached or exceeded, further minimizing potential impacts. The assumptions for analysis of the preferred alternative in the *Revised Draft EIS* and the modified preferred alternative in the *Final EIS* do not include high levels of snowmachine use throughout the park and preserve, nor unmanaged use where substantial snowmachine use does occur, so adverse impacts should be within the range indicated.

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- In the enabling legislation of the Park, Congress identified habitat for fish and wildlife as a purpose for the establishment of Denali. The preferred alternative is found to cause major cumulative impacts to vegetation and wetlands, which constitute the most productive fish and wildlife habitat in the Park, yet it is not found to cause impairment to park resources that fulfill specific purposes identified in the enabling legislation (RDEIS p.93).
- Wilderness resource values are also identified in the Park's enabling legislation as purposes for its establishment. The RDEIS allows major adverse cumulative impacts to wilderness resources and values that will preclude future wilderness designation yet the RDEIS does not find this to impair the wilderness purposes of Denali (RDEIS p. 95).
- The preferred alternative is found to cause major cumulative impacts to subsistence but no impairment (RDEIS p.95).

There are often inconsistencies in the impact analysis. The Park Service regularly asserts there are only minor or moderate impacts to a particular resource value but a few sentences later also acknowledges major cumulative impacts to the same resource value. This is true in the case of vegetation, subsistence, wilderness and soundscape resource values. The Park Service acknowledges the major cumulative impacts will have "serious ramifications on the visitor experience and condition of the park" yet the agency still argues the preferred alternative will not cause impairment because the agency will add new staff to help manage the resource (RDEIS p. 412).

NPS application of impact levels is arbitrary and capricious. It is unclear how the Park Service has come to the conclusion that major cumulative impacts to these resources and values do not constitute impairment to the purposes and values for which the Park was established. The Park Service can not abdicate it's legal responsibilities in this plan simply because the agency has failed to manage the current situation. At a minimum there must be a detailed monitoring, enforcement and funding plan in place before the Park Service can predetermine the agency's ability to manage the preferred alternative for environmental consequences.

C. EPA Finds NPS Impact Analysis Inadequate

The United States Environmental Protection Agency states in the RDEIS on p.472

We have focused our review on the potential impact of snowmobile use on the environment at Denali National Park because we believe that snow machine use, among all proposed uses under the Backcountry Management Plan, has the greatest potential to cause significant environmental impacts . .

EPA further admonished the Park Service for the generality of their discussion of snowmachine impacts and suggested that the Park Service

does not tie these impacts to locations of concern in the Park additions where the most valuable or sensitive resources might be. Thus, the impacts remain largely undefined. The uncertainty raises concerns because this EIS will, for the first time at Denali National Park, result in the establishment of guidelines permitting widespread snowmobile use without a full understanding of the risk to environmental resources within the Park Addition

We concur with the EPA, whose comments have not been addressed in the RDEIS. The impacts of snowmobiles are significant but are not discussed except generally and there is incomplete or unavailable information. This violates 40 CFR 1502.16. and 40 CFR 1502.22. The agency is required to assess the specific impacts of snowmobiling, or if unable because it is impossible to obtain this information or it costs too much, explain that the information is lacking, its relevance to the analysis, and a summary of existing relevant information. The Park Service must examine both the park wide and site specific impacts of

Response to Comments

TWS-24

The application of impact levels is not arbitrary. The levels are spelled out clearly at the end of the General Methodology section of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences. Although major adverse impacts to park resources are not desirable, they are allowable under NPS Management Policies as long as impairment of those resources does not occur. The definition of impairment is also clearly specified and is distinct from the definition of "major" impacts. While it is a valid criticism of the preferred alternative that it insufficiently remedies the major adverse cumulative impacts to some park resources that have already occurred, the agency is nonetheless acting within its legal responsibilities. The actions in the modified preferred alternative would not generally add substantially to adverse impacts already sustained; instead, the modified preferred alternative would largely prevent park resources from becoming impaired in the face of rising visitor use of the backcountry. See also TWS-9 and NPCA-23.

Comments

snowmobile These will confirm what should realistically be the Park Service's default assumption that snowmobiles are impairing a variety of Park and Preserve resources.

VII. WILDERNESS SUITABLE LANDS IN THE NEW PARK

The National Park Service must manage all backcountry areas of the national park to protect wilderness character, consistent with the direction of NPS Management Policies (section 6.3.1), that includes categories of suitable, study, proposed, recommended, and designated wilderness within the scope of its wilderness resource management policy (NPS 2001). Wilderness character includes the natural and scenic condition of the land, natural numbers and interactions of wildlife and the integrity of ecological processes. At its core, wilderness character is more than a physical condition. ANILCA section 101 specifically identifies "preserve wilderness resource values" as a fundamental purpose of the Act.

A. NPS Fails to Fulfill Statutory and Regulatory Mandates for Suitable Wilderness

NPS has long acknowledged and admitted its abysmal failure to comply with statutory and regulatory mandates with respect to wilderness. The Alaska Region is no exception. A 1993 NPS Wilderness Task Force made the stunning admissions that the NPS response to field advisory recommendations for wilderness suitability has been "ineffective at best and past agency leadership has not met its responsibilities in wilderness management." Following these stark observations, in August 2000 the NPS Acting Associate Director of Park Operations and Education distributed an internal NPS study detailing park-by-park a litany of NPS' continued legal violations with regard to wilderness. The report cites NPS' failure to act on the wilderness qualified lands in Alaska Parks as a major deficiency and directs the Regional Director to complete inventories and formulate recommendations to submit to the Secretary of the Interior and the President.

Two years later, a 2002 NPS guidance memorandum acknowledged the scope of NPS' continued disregard of its wilderness responsibilities: "[I]t has become increasingly apparent that knowledge and details of the wilderness review process have been lost since few of these reviews have been conducted by the National Park Service over the past two decades." The same memorandum admitted NPS' obligation: "Because of past lapses, expansion of the National Park System, and changed circumstances, wilderness review is an on-going affirmative NPS obligation."

Denali National Park & Preserve is in fact a wilderness park and its purposes under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980 are to preserve those wilderness values (RDEIS p.53 and p.438). In 1988, as required by ANILCA section 1317 (a), the National Park Service conducted a wilderness suitability review of the 4 million acre New Park. The final environmental impact statement concluded that approximately 3.73 of the 4 million additional acres were suitable for wilderness designation. At that time NPS forwarded a wilderness recommendation of 2.25 million acres to the Secretary of the Interior but the Secretary did not send it to the President as required by ANILCA. There has been no formal action since continuing NPS' failure to comply with statutory and regulatory mandates with respect to wilderness.

B. RDEIS Dismisses Responsibility to Complete Wilderness Recommendation

The RDEIS identifies the purpose of the BCMP as the place to address issues for which the guidance in the 1986 *General Management Plan* is out of date (DBCMP at p.21). The DEIS acknowledges that the wilderness suitability review included in the 1986 GMP is now out of date since a new suitability study would likely result in additional acreage identified as suitable in the Kantishna Hills (RDEIS at p.26).

Yet despite this admission and a clear legal mandate, NPS refuses to address wilderness suitability in the preferred alternative "because of the complexity of the process and the fact that wilderness designation requires congressional action" (RDEIS at p.26). The NPS process for reviewing and recommending wilderness is clearly outlined and within the purview of the National Park Service and Department of the Interior. Only actual designation requires congressional action. In addition, the RDEIS provides no explanation as to when it will fulfill its obligations to complete the assessment and recommendation process. NPS must take immediate and effective action to bring the National Park System into compliance with its wilderness assessment, recommendation, and planning mandates. APA, 5 U.S.C. § 706. NPS must

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Response to Comments

TWS-25

See P&P-6.

Comments

complete the unfinished business of ANILCA section 1317 to effectively complete the backcountry planning process.

C. NPS Fails To Preserve Wilderness Character: Snowmobiles Impair Wilderness Values

NPS must manage inventoried wilderness according to the Wilderness Act, the National Park Service Organic Act, ANILCA, Executive Orders, Mount McKinley National Park enabling legislation and National Park Service policies. NPS can take no action to either diminish the wilderness suitability of the area or reduce the probability of a wilderness designation until the legislative process by Congress has been completed. While we are pleased NPS acknowledges the agency's responsibility to preserve the wilderness character of the 3.73 million acres of suitable wilderness, we believe science and public opinion support our conclusion that the preferred alternative impairs wilderness values and therefore violate NPS law and policy.

In the preferred alternative, NPS claims the proposed actions will not lead to impairment of the park's wilderness character because the limits embodied in the expressed, desired conditions for management areas will still meet the intent of ANILCA and the Wilderness Act. Yet the Park Service recognizes the intangible values of wilderness and the agency's responsibility to forego actions that would detract from the idea of wilderness as a place where human convenience and expediency do not dominate. The preferred alternative allows snowmobile use in 100% of the New Park. This level of motorized use does not meet the intent of the Wilderness Act.

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The Wilderness Act applies stringent standards. Wilderness "shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, [and] the preservation of their wilderness character." 16 U.S.C. § 1131(a). The Wilderness Act prohibits specific human imprints in wilderness lands, including motorized vehicles, roads, structures, and commercial enterprise. 16 U.S.C. § 1133(c). The natural, scenic condition of the land, natural numbers and interactions of wildlife, integrity of ecological processes and opportunities for solitude are all essential characteristics of wilderness. At its core, wilderness character, like personal character, is much more than a physical condition.

Furthermore, the RDEIS acknowledges that the values of the lands determined suitable for wilderness designation in the New Park are the same as the values in the Old Park. The NPS, "Statement of Finding, Permanent Closure," June 2000 found that snowmobile use would result in several impacts to Wilderness resource values.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The future of Denali National Park and Preserve is at a crossroads. The choice before the Park Service is simple: to uphold protections of Denali from the adverse impacts of motorized recreation or to allow degradation of this national treasure. The ultimate choice will have a profound and far-reaching impact on all of Alaska's national parks.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to provide input. We look forward to working with you throughout the process, and look forward to completion and implementation of a Denali Backcountry Plan that will protect and enhance the values of this great national park for present and future generations.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Huffines
Alaska Regional Director
The Wilderness Society

Eric Uhde
Public Lands Advocate
Alaska Center for the Environment

Charles Clusen
Director Alaska Projects
Natural Resource Defense Council

Paul Foreman
Chair
Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

Response to Comments

TWS-26

The park additions are not designated wilderness under the Wilderness Act. However, as has been noted in the Wilderness section of Chapter 3: Affected Environment and other responses in this chapter, the preservation of wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities is fundamental to the management of the Denali backcountry. Congress intended to allow some motorized use within the ANILCA conservation system units, even within some areas designated as wilderness. The BCMP for Denali defines the maximum amount of impacts acceptable from such motorized use by establishing standards for various indicators that represent facets of wilderness character, among other park resource values. The National Park Service believes that the modified preferred alternative appropriately defines these standards given the various statutory mandates applicable to the Denali additions, including the Wilderness Act and ANILCA.

Comments

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Denali National Park
Talkeetna Ranger Station
July 15, 2005

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Denali National Park
Talkeetna Ranger Station

Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

RE: Comments on Draft Backcountry Management Plan

Dear Mr. Anderson:

The undersigned members of the Talkeetna air tour industry appreciate the opportunity to comment on the National Park Service's ("NPS") April 2005 Denali National Park and Preserve Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan General Plan Amendment Environmental Impact Statement ("Draft Plan"). We represent a group of members in our industry who are dedicated to maintaining the environmental integrity of Park, enhancing the quality of visitor experiences, and ensuring visitor safety.

While we commend the NPS's planning efforts, we do not support any of the action alternatives outlined in the Draft Plan. We are deeply concerned that the proposals illegally elevate and promote the interests of a distinct user group (those seeking "natural soundscapes") over the interests of the large majority of park visitors. Because the Draft Plan is contrary to law and sound public policy, we strongly encourage the NPS to prepare a new plan that is consistent with applicable law rather than merely the subjective interests of a distinct user group, and one that will result in actual improvements in the environmental integrity of the Park, visitor safety, and the quality of all visitors' experiences.

Airplane Access

One of the primary reasons NPS developed the Draft Plan was to address issues associated with future growth in the Park. However, NPS has neither established what, if any, adverse impacts could occur as a result of airplane access nor the actual level of use that would trigger the necessity for use restrictions. Therefore, to the extent a final backcountry management plan would impose any use or access restrictions or limitations, we strongly encourage NPS not to implement such restrictions or limitations unless and until significant increases in visitor use is documented and proven necessary to comply with applicable law.

Because NPS has provided no problem with respect to airplane access and landings, we generally oppose each of the action alternatives in the Draft Plan. We feel these proposals are not based on actual use, resource conditions, visitor preferences, or any other legal or factual basis. Rather, these proposals appear to center around NPS's intent to manage the entire Park (Old Park, Additions, and Preserve) as a designated Wilderness Area, although only the Old Park has been designated as such. Moreover,

Response to Comments

AT-1

The BCMP establishes the adverse impacts from unmanaged increases in airplane noise in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences in the Natural Soundscapes, Wilderness Resources, and Recreational Opportunity sections. User conflict issues arising because of aircraft impacts on park visitors on the ground were documented in the 2000 survey of overnight backcountry visitors (RDBCMP p.168-169, Swanson et al. 2002), the extensive public scoping process for the plan, comment letters on the original draft plan, and visitor comments received over many years outside of the planning process.

The adaptive management approach employed in the modified preferred alternative would not depend on a level of use to trigger access restrictions, but a level of noise or other impacts. The level of use could continue to increase indefinitely as long as the resource and social standards expressed in the plan are achieved.

Comments

ANILCA specifically prohibits NPS from managing Park Additions as Wilderness until Congress specifically designates them as part of the Wilderness System. § 1317. As operators of air tour services that have been providing quality visitor services and safe access into the Park for thousands of visitors each year, we strongly urge the NPS to reconsider its fundamental management objectives proposed in the Draft Plan and develop a new plan that is consistent with the Park's purposes and achieves an appropriate balance between preserving the wilderness character of the Old Park without eliminating the only means of access to most areas of the Park Additions.

More specifically, we strongly object to the designation of a limited number of "Major Landing Areas" and "Portals", as well as the distinction made between the two. Historically, air taxis and scenic air tours have flown visitors into the Park landing on various areas of glaciers throughout the Park Additions known for their scenic attraction or quality climbing opportunities. Landing was not restricted based upon the activity in which visitors intended to participate once in the Park. However, the Draft Plan ignores historical use and limits scenic air tours landings to "major landing areas", which include the Kahiltna Base Camp, southwest fork Kahiltna Glacier, and Ruth Amphitheater, and air taxi landings to "portals", which include areas on the Pika Glacier, Coffee Glacier, Buckskin Glacier, Eldridge Glacier, and upper Tokositna Glacier. NPS provides no legal or factual basis for imposing these landing restrictions.

Section 1110(a) of ANILCA guarantees the use of motorized vehicles, including airplanes, to access conservation system units for "traditional activities." § 1110(a). Special access is subject to "reasonable regulations by the Secretary to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units . . . and shall not be prohibited unless, after notice and hearing . . . the Secretary finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area." § 1110(a). The Draft Plan provides no data or indications that regulations imposing airplane access restrictions are necessary to protect the Park resources. Rather, NPS merely suggests that restrictions are necessary because the sound from airplanes interferes with some users' aesthetic values such as opportunity for "solitude" and to hear "natural soundscapes." These purely aesthetic conditions, however, are not protected resources and should not be given preference over NPS's fundamental duty to provide opportunities for public use and enjoyment (Organic Act) or restrict access under § 1110(a) of ANILCA. Further, we are concerned that NPS's proposal to monitor the Park's soundscape following the implementation of the backcountry plan could lead to regulation and limitation of flight routes in addition to landing areas.

Moreover, there is no rational basis for regulating the majority of Park areas to achieve "natural soundscapes" when these areas are only accessible by airplane. In fact, NPS recognizes that "[a]irplanes provide the principal means of access to most of the

¹ "Traditional activities" have generally been understood to include fishing, hunting, sightseeing, camping, picnicking, flying, photography, etc. These traditional activities have occurred in the Park prior to ANILCA and have continued since ANILCA's enactment in 1980.

Response to Comments

AT-2

See SoA-1.

AT-3

ANILCA Section 1110(a) provides for special access to conservation system units for traditional activities and travel to and from villages and homesites. The authorization of air taxi and scenic air tour landings in the park and preserve is a consideration of commercial services in the park, which are governed by the National Park Service Concessions Management Improvement Act of 1998 (Pub. L. 105-391). The standards for regulation and management are very different between the two. The Concessions act requires that the National Park Service determine that commercial services "are necessary and appropriate for visitor use" and "are consistent to the highest practicable degree with the preservation and conservation of the resources and values of the unit." The criteria for making these determinations are further defined in the general Commercial Services section of chapter 2 in the *Revised Draft* and *Final EIS*.

AT-4

The NPS disagrees that "there is no rational basis for regulating the majority of Park areas to achieve 'natural soundscapes' when these areas are only accessible by airplane." The BCMP clearly articulates the resources and values relevant to the park backcountry, including wilderness resource values and natural soundscapes, all of which are supported by law and policy. We agree that some level of disturbance to these resources is necessary and acceptable to provide for access and visitor enjoyment of the park. However, at some point the impact rises to the level of resource impairment, much in the same way that too many cross-country hikers damage vegetation so that the visitor activity must be managed. The proposals put forth in the plan would prevent impairment and allow for a reasonable amount of visitor access while tolerating a certain amount of resource degradation.

Comments

park and preserve. The more remote southern side and much of the northern and western portions of the Additions can only be reached by air or long, difficult overland travel.” Thus, if airplane access were eliminated, there would be no one on the ground to enjoy the “solitude.” Without any actual or real risk of resource impairment, there simply is no basis to limit airplane landings.

Additionally, limiting the landing areas and/or the number of landings at each area, particularly as proposed in Alternative 2, could compromise visitor safety and the quality of visitor experiences. While we do not object to NPS’s efforts to monitor landings, we strongly disagree with these numbers being used to determine future allocations. As you know, glacial conditions in the Park are dynamic. Climate and other natural forces constantly work to alter the landscape and conditions within the Park. That being the case, glacier conditions constantly must be monitored to ensure it will provide a safe landing area. Moreover, should natural conditions prevent any of the very few landing areas to become unfit for landing, operators have no option to land on a different area of designated glaciers, rather all traffic will be diverted to the few remaining landing areas located in other areas of the Park. This could result in overcrowding and overall decrease in the quality of visitor experience. Any management plan should provide for such contingencies and ensure an appropriate number of landing areas.

We also oppose limiting the number of landings because to do so would reduce our overall revenue and result in increased costs to passengers, which could make air access unaffordable for many visitors seeking to flightsee or climb. Accordingly, we encourage NPS to consider more dispersed use by allowing additional landing areas, which not only would provide visitors with a wider range of viewing opportunities, but would allow for the changing glacial and weather conditions, avoid any risk of overuse on any particular landing area, and improve the quality of visitor experiences.

We also disagree with the Draft Plan to the extent it imposes landing restrictions solely on commercial use. In our view, this unfairly discriminates against commercial users, while placing zero limitations or regulations upon private users. NPS should manage the Park on a fair and consistent basis. Moreover, Section 1110(a)’s guarantee of access makes no distinction between commercial and non-commercial access.

We generally support the Draft Plan’s proposal to create an Aircraft Overflights Working Group to develop voluntary measures for achieving desired future resource conditions at Denali. However, we recommend that the NPS limit group members to NPS representatives, commercial airplane operators, and other non-commercial and military operators, as appropriate, as well as a responsible representative of Park users seeking to obtain areas of “solitude” and “natural quiet” within the Park.

Comments on Alternatives 2 and 3

While we generally do not support any of the action alternatives, we find Alternatives 2 and 3 especially problematic. These alternatives essentially eliminate most reasonable and desired access to the Park and either limit access to the few visitors who

Response to Comments

AT-5

The modified preferred alternative provides a variety of potential landing areas for air taxis and scenic air tours. In fact, only two scenic air tour landings have ever been reported outside of the areas that would continue to be open for such landings. Weather or other natural causes may always make some or all landing areas unavailable for landing, and as a result, the National Park Service has never been able to guarantee concessioners that any particular landing area would be available when passengers have booked a flight. The National Park Service shares concerns about the effects on visitor experience and safety from overcrowding at landing areas, and the management area standards are intended to define an acceptable carrying capacity for all backcountry areas of the park, including glacier landings areas. Application of the access management tools in Table 2-11 – if conditions approach the standards – should prevent overcrowding. The National Park Service believes the plan provides an appropriate, although limited, opportunity for glacier landings.

AT-6

In the modified preferred alternative, the National Park Service does not seek to impose any immediate limits on the number of scenic air tour landings and expects at least as many scenic air tour passengers landing on the glaciers after plan implementation as at present. Since business is presently growing it appears that affordability is not an issue at current levels of service. The National Park Service agrees about the risk of overuse and the need for quality visitor experiences, and believes there are limits to the number of landings that should occur at the Ruth or Kahiltna Glaciers for reasons of safety, visitor experience, and resource protection. These limits are defined by way of the desired future resource and social conditions. The National Park Service is also obligated to provide quality experiences for other user groups, and scenic air tour traffic at large volume has detrimental effects both for park resource values and on the quality of experience of many mountaineering and climbing visitors.

AT-7

Commercial use is governed by different parameters than private use in national parks. Commercial uses must be specifically identified as “necessary and appropriate” under concessions management law and meet other criteria in the 1998 National Park Service Concessions Management Improvement Act.

Comments

are capable of self-reliant travel, or restrict visitors requiring services to access the Park to only those areas located along the Park road. As you know, most of the Park is accessible only by airplane. Accordingly, limiting access by air violates the fundamental use and enjoyment mandate provided under the NPS Organic Act, as well as the special access guarantee provided under Section 1110(a) of the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act.

Specifically, NPS simply cannot eviscerate ANILCA's well-established access guarantee by unilaterally narrowing the definition of "traditional activities" to exclude recreational use, which will all but officially close most of the Park to visitor use and enjoyment. Clearly, such actions are contrary to the letter and spirit of ANILCA § 1110(a). For similar reasons, NPS also should not seek legislation to exempt the Old Park from the critical access guarantee provided under § 1110(a).

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Even the extremely limited air access allowed under these two alternatives is bogged down in additional restrictions, which further eliminate access to many user groups. For instance, each alternative would limit airplane landings in the Old Park to McKinley and Kantishna airstrips. Moreover, landings in the Park Additions could occur only if the airplane is dropping off or picking up passengers staying in the Park overnight (in other words, climbers). Since most visitors do not stay overnight in the Park, such landing restrictions arbitrarily eliminate these visitors' ability to enjoy the Park from the ground. Such unreasonable discrimination among user groups is simply not warranted and does nothing to protect the Park's resources. In fact, by not allowing the majority of visitors to land in the Park and spend time enjoying the natural wonders from the ground, NPS effectively will increase the amount of air traffic since the time that would have been spent on the ground, will instead be spent flying over these areas.

In sum, Alternatives 2 and 3 appear to be an overt attempt to close the Park to the majority of visitors and manage the Park according to the desired subjective and "social" conditions of a small contingent of Park visitors. We strongly oppose this management approach and encourage NPS to not consider either Alternative 2 or 3 as a viable management alternative.

Comments on Alternative 4 - Preferred Alternative

Although Alternative 4 seemingly provides more airplane access than Alternatives 2 and 3, it remains an unreasonable management alternative. First, while we generally support expanding (as compared to Alternatives 2 and 3) the areas accessible by airplane to include the Tokositna and Kahiltina Glaciers and the Dunkle Hill/Broad Pass area, it arbitrarily would prohibit scenic air tour landings on the Pika² and Eldridge Glaciers "when climbers are present, with contract provisions to achieve desired future resource conditions." Historically, both climbers and tourists have used the Pika and

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² Map 2-6 mistakenly locates Pika Glacier as the area between Mount Church and Tokositna Glacier; however, Pika Glacier actually is located to the east of the Kahiltina Glacier and west of the Tokositna Glacier.

Response to Comments

AT-8

Alternatives 2 and 3 were not selected as the National Park Service preferred alternative in the *Revised Draft* or *Final EIS*. In those alternatives, the actions related to access for traditional activities were requested by the vast majority of comments on the original *Draft EIS* and therefore needed to be considered within the NEPA process. The specific proposals were not contrary to law, but either acknowledged that new law would be required for implementation or proposed an interpretation of law and regulation that is reasonable. The effect of these actions on visitor use and enjoyment was considered in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences in the section on Recreational Opportunity and Visitor Safety.

AT-9

The preferred alternative has been modified to remove the prohibition against landing when climbers are present on the Pika and Eldridge Glaciers. However, the *Revised Draft EIS* provided several reasons why such a partial separation of user groups would be desirable and within NPS authority. ANILCA 202(3)(a) indicates that providing opportunities and access for "mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities" is a fundamental purpose of the Denali additions. Comments by climbing organizations such as the American Alpine Club and experienced mountaineers during scoping, workshops, and comments on both the original and revised draft BCMPs indicate that scenic air tours can and do interfere with climbing and mountaineering activities. It is a responsibility of the National Park Service to protect this statutorily recognized experience, and managing commercial scenic air tour landings along with other visitor activities is essential to accomplish this.

Comments

Eldridge Glaciers. It is our experience that general demand for scenic air tours is almost six times than that of climbing opportunities.³ Yet, NPS provides no basis for suddenly prohibiting landings for scenic tours simply because climbers are present. Certainly airplanes do not interfere with climbing or mountaineering activities. In fact, airplane access is the only means by which climbers and mountaineers may access these areas.

Moreover, NPS does not explain the basis for requiring contract provisions to achieve some undefined “future resource conditions.” We strongly recommend that NPS clarify this vague language. At a minimum, NPS must define the future resource condition and indicate how the extent to which contract provisions may be used to achieve such conditions.

Additionally, if climbers are present on the Pika or Eldridge, most landing traffic will be funneled to the Ruth Glacier under this alternative. Rather than allow for a system of dispersed use with de minimus impacts, this alternative would concentrate landing activity to a single location, which could result in overcrowding and decrease the quality of visitor experience. Moreover, as explained above, landing conditions on glaciers are dynamic and there is no way to determine whether this spot on Ruth Glacier will continue to be an appropriate landing area in the future. Limiting landing areas also imposes unnecessary and severe financial risks on concessionaires and incidental business permit (“IBP”) holders. For instance, if weather conditions do not allow us to land at Ruth Glacier, and we cannot land on Eldridge or Pika simply because climbers are present, we simply cannot provide the visitor service, resulting in a potential loss of thousands of dollars a day. We oppose this aspect of the Draft Plan and urge NPS to consider such economic consequences as part of its economic impact analysis. Accordingly, we recommend that the NPS eliminate this unnecessary prohibition and allow landings on Pika and Eldridge regardless of the presence of climbers and mountaineers.

Second, this alternative vaguely refers to managing airplane access areas to meet undefined “social conditions.” We support sound management decisions based on facts and evidence supporting agency actions undertaken to protect “resources”, but there simply is no legal or factual basis for managing the Park to accommodate subjective and undefined “social” conditions. See ANILCA § 1110(a).

Third, this alternative arbitrarily discriminates against certain user groups by restricting only scenic air tour landings, while imposing no restrictions on climber-related landings (overnight visitors) in the Park. From a resource perspective, this makes no sense, especially when day users generally impose less impact on resources than overnight users.

³ In 2004, air tour operators transported approximately 1709 climbers and 9,578 scenic passengers who landed in the Park.

Response to Comments

AT-10

Agencies can respond to potential resource impacts on public lands by dispersing use or by concentrating use to an area where impacts can be contained. Dispersal did not seem a viable option in the case of glacier landings because of the volume within the relatively narrow part of the Alaska Range that is readily accessible from Talkeetna. Attempts at dispersal would likely result in major impacts to natural soundscape and wilderness resource values that presently occur at the Ruth spreading to a number of other locations.

The National Park Service acknowledges that glaciers are dynamic, and the modified preferred alternative contains a provision that the locations of Major Landing Areas and Portals can be adjusted over time to respond to changing conditions.

Records from the past 20 years show rapid growth in the number of scenic landings on glaciers on the south side of Denali National Park. Because the vast majority of these scenic landings in the past have not involved the Eldridge or Pika Glaciers, the National Park Service disagrees that any provision in the preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS*, especially as modified for the *Final EIS*, presents any “severe financial risks on concessioners and incidental business permit...holders.”

AT-11

Resource and social conditions are defined in the Management Area sections, where indicators for both natural and social conditions are described and specific standards established. The commercial use of airplanes in national parks is governed by the National Park Service Concessions Management Improvement Act of 1998 (Pub. L. 105-39).

AT-12

The National Park Service disagrees that any provision in the plan discriminates against certain user groups. The plan establishes limits on the number of climbers and mountaineers rather than on the number of air taxi landings, but these limits would indirectly restrict the number of air taxi landings. For Mount McKinley – by far the most popular climbing destination – there would be a firm cap of 1,500 climbers per season, which is much more stringent than any of the limitations proposed for scenic air tour landings. In other locations the number of climbers and mountaineers would eventually be limited by the standards identified under Management Areas.

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Comments

Comments on Alternative 5:

We find this alternative less objectionable than the other alternatives to the extent that it appears to provide more airplane access; however, we do not support this management proposal as a whole. Under this alternative, NPS would not impose the arbitrary landing restrictions on the Pika or Eldridge Glaciers. However, NPS would subject scenic air tour landings to contract provisions it considers necessary to achieve undefined future resource and “social” conditions. As explained in our comments on Alternative 4, NPS must define the desired conditions and clarify the type of contract provisions it intends to require to achieve those conditions. Moreover, there is no legal or factual basis to management the Park to achieve any set of “social” conditions. Management decisions should be based on resource protection and public use and enjoyment as mandated by the NPS Organic Act. NPS’s ability to regulate the Park for aesthetic values is limited and certainly cannot trump its statutorily mandated duty to provide access (ANILCA § 1110(a)) or opportunities for public use and enjoyment (Organic Act).

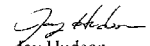
As with Alternative 4, we strongly oppose the distinctions made between air taxi landings and scenic air tour landings. Such distinction is discriminatory in nature and imposes unfair restrictions on visitors (mostly non-climbers) who seek to view the Park, but not sleep there.

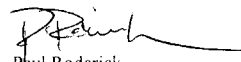
Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this very important Draft Plan. We are hopeful that NPS will seriously consider our concerns and develop a Plan that is consistent with law, protects the Park, and affords all visitors an opportunity to experience all areas of the Park. The air tour industry stands ready to assist NPS in developing a Plan that accomplishes these significant tasks.


Sincerely,


Suzanne Rust
K2 Aviation


Jay Hudson
Hudson Air Service


Paul Roderick
Talkeetna Air Taxi


Doug Geeting Aviation


FLY DENALI, INC.

Response to Comments

Comments



Superintendent Paul Anderson
Denali National Park & Preserve
PO Box 9
Denali National Park, AK 99755

July 14, 2005

Re: Comments on Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan

Greetings Superintendent Anderson,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Revised Draft of the Backcountry Management Plan. Alaska Wildland Adventures looks forward to our 30th year of bringing appreciative visitors to Denali National Park and Preserve. As you know, Alaska Wildland Adventures spent 10 years as partner and manager of Denali Backcountry Lodge. While we deeply miss having a presence in Kantishna, we remain committed to working to preserve the wilderness characteristic of Denali National Park and Preserve. Our trips continue to utilize Kantishna and we have strong relationships with both Kantishna Roadhouse and North Face Lodge. We also respect and appreciate the opportunity offered by the National Park Service to provide our “two cents” on the Revised Draft.

Response to Comments

Comments

Most of our guests are visitors from the Lower 48 that live in urban areas where intact eco-systems were eliminated long ago. For many, their visit to Denali National Park and Preserve is the first time they have ever experienced being surrounded by a landscape that is practically unaltered by man. For this reason, we believe that protecting Denali's natural ecology should be the number one priority of the Backcountry Management Plan.

Alaska Wildland Adventures believes strongly that Denali National Park and Preserve should be managed solely as a wilderness area that provides only non-motorized opportunities for visitors. For this reason, we prefer that the Old Park definition of "traditional activities" to be applied to the remaining Park and Preserve. Most lands surrounding Denali National Park borders provide ample access to snow machines. We do not believe that recreational snow machining fits the wilderness character of which the National Park Service strives to maintain for Denali National Park. We also do not interpret ANILCA to allow for snow machining under special access provisions and do not view recreational snow machining as a "traditional activity".

Alternative Four discusses the option of offering guided hiking in the entrance area, specifically the Rock Creek, Roadside, Jonesville, Nenana River, and Triple Lakes Trails. We support this idea, as it concentrates use in the front-country. We would however only continue to support this alternative if these trails were managed under the same limits as Kantishna: specifically, 10 guests and one guide per trail per day. This

1

Response to Comments

AWA-1

The modified preferred alternative retains the options for commercial guided hiking on selected entrance area trails that can be used for both interpretive opportunities as well as for connecting destinations (for example, Nenana Canyon and the park Visitor Center; the Visitor Center and Park Headquarters/Sled Dog Kennel). No group size limits have been determined for entrance area trails, however. The high construction design standard of these trails would allow more people in each group than would be true hiking off of developed trails in Kantishna, which is the comparison offered by the comment. Many trails, including the popular Horseshoe Lake and Mount Healy Overlook Trails, would not allow commercial guided groups and would be available for non-guided visitors. Also, the trails are in the frontcountry, not the backcountry, and the expectations should be different. Where trails do cross into the backcountry, such as the Triple Lakes trail, backcountry group size limits would apply once the trail crosses into the backcountry management area.

Comments

will keep large groups from overusing these trails and impacting the non-guided visitor experience.

Alternative Five addresses guided day hiking and backpacking throughout the Old Park. We do not support this alternative as written, and we specifically do not support the Park concessionaire as being the designated provider of these activities. The expertise of the concessionaire is in handling large group tourism. Guiding hikes demands an entirely different skill set. We also would like to see guided backpacking taken out of this alternative and solely allow for day-hiking. We would only support Alternative Five if guided day-hiking in the Old Park was done in conjunction with the Murie Science and Learning Center (MSLC) and under the same trail limits as enforced in the Kantishna Area. We believe that if all guided hiking in the Old Park were managed under a central entity, such as the MSLC, a higher and more consistent level of service would be provided to park visitors. It would not be necessary for the MSLC to provide all the guides, however. We can envision a process whereby companies demonstrating experience in the Park can have trained and authorized guides to lead hikes on a limited basis. Limits, fees, and standards would be maintained by the MSLC.

Pursuant to our comments on past and current Denali management plans, we also believe that leaders of groups with camping permits at Savage River Campground should be able to hike with their trip participants in the areas surrounding Savage River Campground as well as join their groups on hikes accessed by the VTS.

2

3

Response to Comments

AWA-2

In the modified preferred alternative, a guided day-hiking service would continue to be offered in the western portion of the Old Park with access from Kantishna. Although this service would be offered as a commercial visitor service, there is no necessity or intent that it be included in the concession contract held by the Doyon/Aramark Joint Venture. The National Park Service would choose the most appropriate of several commercial visitor service authorizations to use for this service, and in the near term, the service is likely to be offered using similar contracts to those for guided hiking presently held by the Kantishna lodges. The Murie Science and Learning Center could also offer educational programs throughout the Old Park, and those could include partnerships with other entities.

AWA-3

Provision is made in the modified preferred alternative to allow commercial groups staying at Savage Campground group sites under an Incidental Business Permit to guide groups on the Savage Alpine Trail between Savage Campground and Savage River. This opportunity is consistent with the interest of NPS to provide some reasonable opportunities in the frontcountry that would allow commercial groups to hike with their guides and that would also encourage walking between destinations. Because this trail would primarily be in the designated wilderness area, group size restrictions would apply. Because this trail is almost entirely on tundra and the presence of large numbers of groups would have a much higher impact than in forested areas, the National Park Service does not intend to open this trail to commercial groups other than those staying overnight at the Savage Campground. Opportunities for guided hikes elsewhere in the Old Park would have to be arranged through the Murie Science and Learning Center or a concessioner that has a permit for guided hiking.

Comments

While we totally support the maintenance of a “no formal trails” policy, we do support formalizing trails around the Wonder Lake area for those campers who stay at the Wonder Lake Campground as well as a trail from Eielson Visitor Center to Gorge Creek. Trails in these areas exist informally, and designating trails to concentrate use will help to minimize damage to the vegetation. Alternative Four discusses restricting day-hiking to

developed trails identified under “Backcountry Facilities”. We do not support the idea of restricting guided hiking to the developed trails as identified under “Backcountry Facilities”. For some areas, restricting guided hiking to trails may be appropriate, but for many areas we do not believe it is necessary. Restrictions should be developed on a case-by-case basis. Simply to restrict all guided hiking to developed trails is unnecessarily restrictive. And as noted above, we only support guided hiking in conjunction with the Murie Science and Learning Center.

4

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share our comments and concerns on the Denali Backcountry Management Plan. Good luck with your massive endeavor. If I can provide any more information, please call upon me.

Best Regards,

Kirk Hoessle, President
Alaska Wildland Adventures
PO Box 389
Girdwood, AK 99587
(907) 783-2928 or (800) 334-8730

Response to Comments

AWA-4

The provision referred to only applied in certain units of the Kantishna Hills, not parkwide. However, the provision was removed in the modified preferred alternative.

Comments

July 12, 2005

Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Steven Bergt
2607 W. 32nd Avenue
Anchorage, AK 99517-1828
[REDACTED]

Dear Superintendent Anderson;

Thank you for taking the time to read the following comments regarding the "Revised Backcountry Plan" for Denali National Park and Preserve. First, I would like to emphasize the word "Preserve". It is imperative that the most essential purpose of the Backcountry Plan is to preserve what OUR original intention of setting aside this crown jewel of wilderness intended to do. We are responsible for protecting the wilderness values of the park and to preserve the ability to experience solitude in a quiet and untrammelled environment. Yourself and those responsible for upholding the mission of preserving wilderness values surely must know that Denali National Park and Preserve is a unique and special place. It should be managed as a wilderness park with non-motorized opportunities for wilderness experiences. Again, the protection of natural ecological processes and wildlife should be the number one priority for the Backcountry Management Plan.

I have had the great privilege to be able to experience Denali National Park and Preserve since 1972. I was 12 years old when a family friend allowed me the opportunity to go with her and spend my first week in the Park. During this visit I experienced a completely new awareness of wilderness and the importance of preserving this intact ecosystem. Thirty three years later I still spend at least two weeks every summer in the park hiking and exploring it's natural beauty and wildness. I have spent my entire life in Alaska and have seen many of our wildest places

become tarnished by motorized vehicles. I urge you to not allow recreational snowmachining in Denali National Park and Preserve. Recreational snowmachining is not a traditional activity under ANILCA's special access provisions. The old Park Definition of traditional activities should be applied to the remaining Park and Preserve.

1

It is imperative that the Backcountry Plan should stipulate that the National Park Service finalize the Wilderness recommendations and designation process. The ANILCA mandated this process, and it should be completed for the Park additions. In the meantime, the Backcountry Plan should not set indicators and standards at levels that will degrade areas suitable for Wilderness designation.

2

During recent visits to the Park my fellow companions and I have experienced increased air traffic noise. We have all commented on this ever increasing noise that spoils the natural sounds and solitude. A natural soundscape is a key wilderness resource. The backcountry plan should identify those areas of the Park where current noise levels exceed standards and provide specific mitigations for these problem areas. In order to protect the soundscape of the Park is important that the National Park Service limit scenic tour landings and work with aircraft operators to protect Denali's natural sounds from the incessant noise of overflights.

3

Having spent many days hiking the backcountry in Alaska there is no other place like Denali National Park and Preserve where an individual can experience trailless hiking. I urge the National Park Service to continue the policy of no formal trails in the backcountry. Only under

Response to Comments

Bergt-1

See P&P-5.

Bergt-2

See P&P-6.

Bergt-3

Table 4-1 in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences provides a comparison of noise conditions to standards in places where measurements have been conducted. Although the National Park Service does not have the level of information necessary for firm conclusions about problem areas, the Access Management Tools in Table 2-11 of the modified preferred alternative would be the general methods by which the National Park Service would resolve problems in the future.

Comments

heavy use conditions should trails be constructed to avoid impairment to the natural vegetation and soils and that all trails should undergo NEPA public process.

The Backcountry Plan should change the preferred "Alternative 4" to "Alternative 2" which does the most to protect the Park resources. Specifically, "Alternative 4" which will result in the highest impairment to the Park, allows levels of use and impact associated with Management Areas designated as 'A' Corridors and Portals that will be highly incompatible with Wilderness suitability. The only reasonable alternative that supports "Preserving" the natural resources of the Park is "Alternative2".

Finally, the Backcountry Plan should include stipulations that the National Park Service will strengthen the monitoring and enforcement of the elements of the plan. Data analysis should be conducted more frequently than the current five year period in order for there to be a more proactive process in protecting the Parks natural resources.

4

In closing, I want to thank the National Park Service for their effort in creating the draft plan. I appreciate the opportunity to be able to provide input regarding responsible management of our wild lands. I look forward to the continuing effort to protect Denali National Park and Preserve as a truly unique and wild place.

Sincerely;

Steven Bergt

Response to Comments

Bergt-4

See NPCA-5.

Comments

July 15, 2005

Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

From: Barbara Brease
P.O. Box 549
Healy, AK 99743

Comments on the Revised Denali Backcountry Plan

I encourage you to support the **People for Parks** alternative as developed with the combined efforts of the Sierra Club, Denali Citizens' Council, Wilderness Society and others. The NPS Preferred alternative does not appear to give much consideration to the impacts the plan would have on wildlife, especially the northern boundary of the park. It seems risky to support any alternative that leaves the door open for unknown impacts over the next twenty years.

Motorized Access

My biggest concern with the NPS preferred alternative is that it authorizes continued and even expanded recreational snowmachining in the park additions and Preserve. I support the People for Parks Alternative to prohibit this use. Despite all the improved technology, snowmachines cause substantial harm to plants, animals, air quality and the wilderness experience of park visitors. Since recreational snowmachining is available on the surrounding public lands, as well as many areas in the state, it is reasonable to designate Denali backcountry as non-motorized as possible to protect the wilderness.

If snowmachine use is increased and expands into more locations in the park additions and preserve (under the NPS preferred alternative), potential impacts could be severe, especially in combination with the liberal hunting and trapping limits in those areas. With snowmachine access, park wolves, bears and other wildlife will be especially vulnerable.

1

Current bag limits in the park and preserve allow for the shooting of 10 wolves a day from Aug 30 to April 30 with a hunting license and unlimited wolf killing with a trapping license (which can also be done with shooting). Hunters and trappers will have increased access to wolf families that inhabit the park additions *as well as the old park*. Timely monitoring would be impossible since sealing records are not available until the following spring. (Killing one wolf is a severe impact). The Park and Preserve (especially the Northern boundary) are integral parts of the Park ecosystem. If anything, we need to increase protection in these areas

Snowmachine traffic could also displace many animals including denning bears and wolves. Packed trails could change movements of animals. We know human generated noise will affect the behavior of most wildlife. At this time we cannot quantify the impacts because we don't know them all. (Ex: is it ok to disturb one nesting pair of swans?). Those that want recreational access to public lands can go to the surrounding public lands.

I believe that you should apply the definition for traditional activities, to the 1980 Park Additions and Preserve in the plan. Applying this definition will prevent the authorization of recreational snowmachining in the park additions and preserve. I am sure that many will support the fact that recreational snowmachining is not a traditional activity.

Response to Comments

Brease-1

The potential for these cumulative impacts is identified in the Wildlife section of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences for all alternatives of the *Revised Draft EIS*.

Comments

Guided Sport Hunting

The People for Parks Alternative recommend retaining the status quo regarding guided hunting. While I feel strongly that no guided sports hunting operations be conducted, I favor the status quo to the NPS preferred alternative. As a member of the Middle Nenana River Advisory Committee to the Alaska State Board of Game, I am not aware that the need to increase hunting opportunity in the Park and Preserve has been demonstrated, and certainly not something to be suggested to the Board of Game or Alaskan hunters.

2

According to the EIS, wildlife populations would not be adversely affected by harvest from guided hunts. Any increase in mortality is certainly an “effect” on wildlife populations, and it seems an incorrect assumption, if the entire southwest preserve is opened for guiding Guided hunting, in combination with increased motorized access, could have a very serious impact on wildlife populations.

3

Park Road/Spring Trail

I do not support the plowing of the park road from Park Headquarters to Mile 7, as stipulated by the NPS preferred alternative. Headquarters has always been a popular point to embark upon for wilderness opportunities in the winter. The road is wide enough for dog mushing and for skiers. March 1 is too early to start plowing the road since the road itself if is a perfect route for mushers and skiers. What is the rush to clear overflow ice? That is a natural feature of the area and can be dealt with in late April.

A spring trail to Mile 7 and a plowed road to Savage Campground may potentially impact the Margaret Wolf Family. A trail and plowing would increase access and use to a popular skiing/mushing area in the Jenny Creek drainage. The Margaret wolves use the area to den in the spring. Since den selection begins in February and March (when human winter activity is at it's highest) dog teams and skiers should be discouraged from going up Jenny Creek in the winter and spring. If a trail is established and the park road plowed, I would encourage a closure in the Jenny Creek area.

4

Encouraging dog teams to use the park requires caution. There is a possibility that this could introduce viruses (such as parvo) to the wolves. We know the park dogs are vaccinated, but vaccinations are not required of other dogs that enter the park.

5

Al Lovaas, former NPS Chief Wildlife Biologist for the Alaska Region, states in the 1989 George Wright Forum, “The first lesson of ecology is that all resources, all facets and features of an ecosystem are equivalently important and indispensable because they support one another. ANILCA mandates optimal functioning of entire ecological systems.” All of the backcountry lands are an integral part of the park’s wilderness.

Barbara Brease

Response to Comments

Brease-2

In the modified preferred alternative, the hunting guide areas in the southwest preserve would be adjusted to encompass the entire area of the preserve. The existing distribution of guide areas does not follow a rational pattern that is simple for guides and clients to determine where to hunt (see Map 3-6 in the *Revised Draft EIS*). The guide areas are also too small to be viable as concessions, as evidenced by several years of no activity. The guides and professional hunting organizations have expressed desire in public comment on the original and revised draft plans for the entire southwest preserve to be available for guided hunting.

Brease-3

Although additional wildlife harvest would obviously result in an immediate change in an absolute numerical sense, State hunting regulations would be expected to prevent any population-level impact. The guided hunts would take place within an area where sport hunting already occurs, and might simply displace some of the impacts from the existing activity.

Brease-4

The modified preferred alternative calls for road plowing only when necessary to prepare the road for summer season use, and it does not include an extension of the existing Spring Trail west of its current terminus at mile 7 of the park road. As a result, no immediate action is believed necessary to protect wolf den sites in the Jenny Creek area.

Brease-5

Except for continuing the existing guided dog mushing and dog freighting commercial services, the modified preferred alternative has no specific provisions to encourage use of dog teams at Denali.

Comments

Greetings,
I am writing you in regards to the future of the wilderness values within the backcountry of Denali National Park & Preserve.

I would like to voice my support for alternative 2 within the selection choices for the future of management policies here at Denali.

I am aware that the NPS has a preferred alternative (no. 4), that I feel does not do enough to preserve the wilderness values that Denali is recognized for on a worldwide scale. People come here from many reaches of the planet to be in a place where the footprint of man is as comparable to as natural a balance as possible. Denali is a place for people to discover a sense of exploration, and as the superintendent introduced the new film this summer..."a place to discover our own meanings of Denali". To funnel people to specific trails, have more signs of people, encountering large groups, and more people explaining the meanings of Denali certainly runs counter for that sense of personal discovery.

The people have fought time and again to retain the primitive and natural nature of Denali whether it was a road issue, a numbers issue, snowmachine issue, or now the backcountry issue. People want this park to remain different and unique. Denali has world renown for the values it preserves now. I, and many others on the planet will grieve to experience this loss of character...and what for, really. Maybe through dialogue, it is time to get the tourist industry (eco or not) to support these values as well.

I feel that none of the alternatives addresses the idea of encountering large groups within the Old Park 1 management area. Certainly within a half mile of the road corridor there will be large groups, but as one gets away from the road there should be some method explored of limiting group size to avoid encounters with large groups. This would also support the concept of no formal trails in the backcountry which many people come here to experience.

I also would like to see the definition of traditional activities (i.e. recreational snowmachining) be expanded to the Park and Preserve portions of Denali as well, to prevent the loss of our soundscape here at Denali.

When hiking near the Alaska Range even in the Old Park, one can set their watch by the flightseeing on the North side of the Range, it would be prudent to limit these numbers, as well as the size of the Portal areas on the South side of the Range. I also believe that to designate campsites out west will also increase use and demand for more activities, flights, transportation and trails in an area that currently does not need them.

Once again, I would like to express support for Alternative 2 within the choices for backcountry management.

Response to Comments

Colianni-1

The modified preferred alternative would limit some areas to a group size limit of 12 and others to a group size of 6. All of OP-1, including the backcountry areas accessible from the park road corridor, would have a group size limit of 12. This limit is a reduction in the day-hiking group size presently allowed for NPS Discovery Hikes (15 plus a ranger) and other guided activities in the Old Park. Many of these guided groups travel more than one-half mile from the park road.

Colianni-2

The backcountry campsites in the modified preferred alternative would be unlikely to generate additional demand for activities and transportation. The number of campsites would be relatively small in proportion to overall backcountry use, and the existing camper buses could be used for transportation. The sites would be very primitive, with no amenities except perhaps outhouses and food lockers. They would be located in conjunction with existing mining access routes such as the Moose Creek and Skyline trails, so new trail construction would be unnecessary to reach them. There might be new commercial services that utilize the sites, but those services could presently be authorized without this plan as a dispersed guided backpacking opportunity. This plan provides a clear direction as to where those commercial opportunities could take place.

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2

Comments

Respectfully Yours,

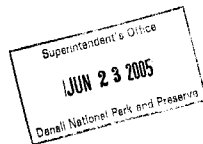
Ruth Colianni
P.O. Box 198
Denali Park, AK 99755

Response to Comments

Comments



Miki & Julie Collins
ALASKAN FREELANCE WRITERS/PHOTOGRAPHERS
LAKE MINCHUMINA, ALASKA 99757



Paul Anderson, Superintendent
Denali National Park
PO Box 9
Denali Park Alaska 99755

June 20 2005

Thank-you for the opportunity to comment on your Revised Backcountry Management Plan. We were especially pleased the Park included impacts to subsistence users and resources in the revision.

Overall we still prefer Alternative 2 as the best way to preserve the Park for present and future uses, including subsistence, scientific, and true wilderness recreational activities. The Preferred Alternative, if anything, provides for more development than the original Preferred Alternative. It is distressing to see the Preferred Alternative would cause major cumulative impacts on vegetation, minor to moderate adverse impacts on animals, areas where the soundscape would have major cumulative impacts, and moderate (foreseeably major) adverse impacts on subsistence. Alternates 1 and 5 are unacceptable due their impacts on the wilderness. If the Park resources are to 'remain 'unimpaired' for...future generations" (p.13) Alternative 2 seems the best way to do this. It is discouraging to see that of the public comments you received, 93% favored the precursor of Alternative 2 (our preference) and only 1% favored the NPS preference (p.432).

Our specific concerns include:

The Muddy River draining Lake Minchumina is the single best wetland habitat in the Park. It should be protected as such and should NOT be a Corridor. While local summer traffic is sometimes significant, labeling it a Corridor invites substantial activity from outside this locality. The Executive Summary (p. 9) says a Corridor allows very high encounters with people, large groups of people, high evidence of modern use and high natural sound disturbance, all of which is painful to think about and would be difficult to deal with. In addition to concern for our subsistence activities and the solitude we value so much, this area is critical habitat for moose, bear, wolves, beaver, waterfowl, kingfishers, birds of prey and other animals that thrive here. Additionally it is a vitally important moose hunting area for local subsistence people. Labelling it a Corridor will invite outside hunters who have already badly damaged moose populations on the bigger rivers, as well as

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Response to Comments

Collins-1

The modified preferred alternative revises the management area designations to show the Muddy/Kantishna River as a Corridor for the summer season only. This designation is appropriate because conditions on the river in terms of visitor presence and impact will be higher than the surrounding areas since the river is the primary transportation artery in this part of the park and preserve during the summer season. Designating the river as a Corridor does not mean that the National Park Service will encourage traffic to this location. It does mean that when the National Park Service monitors conditions along the river, a higher level of use is acceptable than in the surrounding areas. Visitors are responsible for operating boats responsibly, but the National Park Service can enforce rules more stringently if needed to address particular problems such as high speeds in areas with low forward visibility. Corridors have a "medium" standard for administrative presence, which calls for rangers to "make routine visitor contacts." Thus, it is a goal of the plan to establish a greater patrol presence on this Corridor, particularly during busy seasons.

1

Comments

Collins/2

tourists who will be disappointed that, despite its proximity to Denali, no views of the mountain are available due to the densely vegetated riverbanks, and wildlife sightings tend to be brief for the same reason. Due to very limited forward visibility on the river, increased traffic, especially the high-speed boats used by those traveling in from other areas, would be dangerous. Additionally, on p. 503 you confirm that this Corridor is also a winter route, an unfortunate deception as the winter ice is dangerous due to warm outflow from Lake Minchumina that melts the ice from below. Locals know to stay off this route in the winter. Due to changes in the Foraker River, we do not even know how much longer the Muddy "Corridor" will even be navigable by motorboat because of increased silting. Finally, labeling it a Corridor implies at least some Administrative presence (executive summary p. 9) but NPS probably does not have the fiscal capacity of keeping a ranger there (an important consideration during hunting season.)

We were happy to see NPS Preferred Alternative does not include commercially guided hunts in the northwest preserve. In addition to potentially impacting subsistence, the logistics of managing hunts in that area (particularly the Foraker/Herron drainage) would be severe. We also oppose scenic air tour landings in the north additions for the same reasons.

On p. 501 you report that the trapping season closes by the end of February, but this is not correct. Wolf, beaver, otter, and muskrat have later seasons. Also, in March and April we are restocking cabins, cutting firewood, doing general repairs and using the trails repeatedly. Current conflicts with guided tourists and the potential for conflicts with increased snowmachine traffic are concerns. The Preferred Alternative anticipates growth in snowmachine traffic which will adversely impact subsistence activities. We would like to see snowmachines restricted in sensitive areas and areas critical to subsistence. Any development in the Kantishna/Stampede area is likely to spill over and adversely affect us. We are particularly concerned about recreational snowmachine use impacting subsistence traplines as it has already done in so many other areas around the State.

We are concerned that the client limits on the local dog mushing concession are too high if they continue using our trapline to access the Old Park. The number is high enough to cause significant impact to subsistence resources. In the past, even with more limited clients, we have felt it necessary to put off other activities to "drag" the trail to make sure it, and the cabins, are in order for the next subsistence trapping season. While the cabins are not to be used for commercial purposes, they have occasionally been used in the past and this illicit use might increase if the size of the parties increases.

While some people want to see shelter cabins and tents in the Old Park, we feel it would be best to preserve the wilderness as it

Response to Comments

Collins-2

The incorrect statement was deleted in the places where it occurred.

Collins-3

Conflicts between recreational snowmachine use and subsistence use are documented in both the Subsistence Resources and Opportunities section of Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences and Appendix C: ANILCA 810(a) Summary of Evaluations and Findings. Some effects on subsistence resources and opportunities from non-subsistence snowmachine use are expected under the modified preferred alternative, but the management area designations in critical subsistence areas were selected to minimize conflicts (see SRC-2) and the National Park Service could use the access management tools in Table 2-11 to minimize the impacts.

Collins-4

The client limits are within the range allowed by management area designations. The issue raised is too specific to be addressed within the context of a general management plan document, but could be addressed separately through concessions management.

Comments

Collins/3

is, because most other recreational areas in the state are more open to such development whereas NPS has the power to preserve its wilderness untouched, if it chooses to do so.

One comment is unrelated to the Plan. On page 484 you reprint a letter from the State of Alaska, which quotes NPS reporting "no known use of airplanes by local rural subsistence users." This NPS statement is not correct. Aircraft have been used in this area by numerous historic old-timers such as Slim Carlson, Fabian Carey, Ray Tremblay, Val Blackburn, etc, as well as more recent users including John Burns, Jack Hayden, the Starrs and ourselves. Landings or airdrops for subsistence purposes have occurred on the McKinley, Slippery, Foraker and Birch Creeks; on Lonely Lake, Carlson Lake, Castle Rocks Lake, Livetrapp Lake and many other locations, both winter and summer. We can help document this if NPS feels it is necessary to do so to establish a record of "customary & traditional."

In closing, we wish to acknowledge the thoughtful sympathy card you sent us last winter after our father died. It was so kind and really meant a lot to us. Thankyou, sincerely.

Good luck in working through all the conflicting advice and demands I am sure you'll receive regarding the BMP.

*Julie Collins
Mike Collins*

Response to Comments

Comments

F. C. Dean – dena_bc_plan_comment

1

15 July 2005

Comments on Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan for Denali National Park and Preserve.

Frederick C. Dean
810 Ballaine Road, Fairbanks, AK 99709
Tel. (907) 479-6607

General Comments

1. My personal preference is Alternative 3 > Alternative 4 over the others.

Discussion – One can presently find wildland/wilderness experiences somewhat similar to those that are possible in Denali National Park and Preserve (DNPP) in other areas of the Alaska Range. However, as one goes either east or west of DNPP the situation changes considerably. The ecosystem becomes somewhat different, and certainly the assemblage of plants and animals is different. DNPP affords a nearly unique, if not actually unique, physiographic and ecological setting in combination with unusual opportunities for access. This combination can not be found elsewhere, even today. Less restrictive patterns of land use either exist currently or can be reasonably expected elsewhere throughout the Interior and in the Alaska Range. This leaves DNPP with a special responsibility, i.e. preserving the opportunity to find land in this ecosystem that is as nearly wilderness as possible, given its history and socio-political realities.

Philosophically, I would like to see conditions described under Alternative 2 continue. Realistically, I suspect that increasing pressures from all sorts of users will continue to increase as they have been doing for the past 50 years. On a long-term basis, that would make continuance of Alternative 2 conditions uncertain; a slow but steady degradation would be nearly assured.

2. The backcountry plan does not need to provide for all types of experiences for all people in all portions of the DNPP's backcountry.

Discussion - Any plan that is adopted needs to recognize that it is not "undemocratic" to provide some areas that offer wild land experience to anyone who is willing to go under their own power while simultaneously restricting (actively or through "friction") access to real wilderness to those qualified in terms of past experience and equipment. We, as a society, do not insist that everyone be admitted to all opportunities without fulfilling some requirements of adequate background. Persons seeking to develop wild land experience would be able to do so in many sections of DNPP without incurring unreasonable risk as a result of their inexperience. Beginners usually experience high levels of satisfaction in areas that provide wildness, but not real wilderness, since conditions are relative to their everyday or past experiences. Once they have gained enough experience to reduce the extra risks to their companions (and also potential societal costs resulting from emergencies attributable to inexperience) these individuals will undoubtedly move into areas that are either or both more difficult and more remote. This is as it should be. The result will be fewer people in trouble as well as less wilderness resource "consumption" and degradation.

3. I have serious concerns about over-reliance on visitor perceptions of their experience as a primary basis for setting standards and levels of maximum

1

Response to Comments

Dean-1

The National Park Service agrees that a reliance on visitor perceptions could allow a gradual decline in wilderness resource quality. Although visitor surveys would be used to monitor some resource impacts, the data that would be sought are objective and quantified, and meant to be compared to the standards articulated in the plan. As long as the standards are not adjusted over time, the use of visitor surveys should provide accurate data to assess the success of management in reaching the goals for each management area.

Comments

F. C. Dean – dena_bc_plan_comment

2

acceptable departure from undisturbed, natural conditions. The baseline should remain essentially fixed at extremely low levels of disturbance in areas intended to offer wild and wilderness experiences.

Discussion – As our country's population grows and as the population is increasingly urbanized a larger and larger proportion of the visitors to DNPP will have a frame of reference that includes less and less wildness. Thus, in relative terms, there will be a trend toward the acceptance of conditions that include increasingly more and more disturbance.

A clear example of this phenomenon can be found easily in discussions of wildlife seen along the Park road.

It will be important to sample visitor reactions and make use of the information, but the underlying standards should not become increasingly tolerant in parallel with increasing scarcity of the wild land/wilderness resource.

4. All decisions relating to wild and wilderness country management should be as conservative as is possible in the sense of maintaining future options. This sort of resource is difficult if not impossible to rebuild and should not be jeopardized as a result of short-term convenience or the shortage of management resources.

5. Adaptive management is a powerful tool that should be used. It should not become a mechanism for shifting standards.

6. It is extremely important to insure the continuation into the future of conditions that will permit wildlife to return to habitat areas and features that have been used in the past but are not presently used, e.g. caribou calving in the Foggy Pass area, raptor eyries, movement corridors, etc.

7. I would urge a strong effort to return the Old Park to its freedom from motorized conveyances operating on the land and water surface.

8. I would recommend changing the phrase "Minimally Acceptable Resource Conditions" to "Maximum Acceptable Resource Conditions." The implication of the former is the opposite of what is intended.

9. Reliance on voluntary cooperation, registration, etc. (a process mentioned several times in the Revised Plan) has not proven to be an effective mechanism for achieving desired outcomes. I suspect that this will be particularly true in a region well-known for the "independence" of its citizens.

More Specific Comments

- a. The Revised Plan states that Alternative 4 (NPS Preferred) would require substantially more financial resources for its administration. This alone is a particularly strong argument against adoption of that Alternative. When considering how to handle what is basically a "one-time" resource in a period of tight (and shrinking?) agency budgets we should not rely on a plan that requires significant increases in financial investment to make it work properly. In fact, in such periods regardless of the chosen Alternative, the understanding should be that a shortage of management resources will automatically result in policies and procedures that will attempt to freeze conditions until management resources are adequate. (The shuttle does not fly with half a budget.)

- b. In the description of Management Areas > Old Park > OP1: "...not accessible to motorized transportation besides from the existing road..." might be used to argue that motorized transport could be used in OP1 if it started from the existing road. I would revise the wording unless your intent is to provide such a loophole; if that is the case I strongly disapprove.

Response to Comments

Dean-2

The modified preferred alternative adds a category for indicators related to wildlife population, distribution, and demographics. Although specific indicator and standard language would have to be developed during implementation, this change articulates the National Park Service intent to determine through monitoring whether changes in visitor use affect wildlife habitat usage. The agency could then use access management tools to prevent wildlife displacement from areas that have traditionally been used.

Dean-3

The column headings were changed to "Resource Condition" and "Social Condition" to eliminate the possibility of confusion.

Dean-4

Voluntary efforts may not always achieve a high success rate. However, in some instances 100% compliance is not necessary in order to achieve a management objective. If voluntary measures are not working sufficiently or the National Park Service does not believe they would work if tried, actions that are more restrictive are possible under the terms of the plan.

Dean-5

See NPCA-9.

Dean-6

The description of OP-1 was revised in response to other concerns. It now specifies that the management area "has limited opportunities for motorized access," reflecting the fact that some motorboat and airplane access is allowed under regulation.

Comments

F. C. Dean – dena_bc_plan_comment

3

- c. Item “b” above may be especially relevant to snow machines; there have already been documented instances of the use of unauthorized snow machines in the vicinity of the East Fork Research Cabin. In at least one instance they appeared to have come south from the north boundary and then left along the road.
- d. Table 2-6 > Notes. The consideration of “displaced” visitors is extremely important! This is difficult to sample but critical. I am glad to see it explicitly mentioned.
- e. The visual impact of camping density does not seem to have been considered insofar as the experience of day hikers or people on the road is concerned. There is discussion of the choice of the camper regarding whether or not to locate his/her tent within sight of another tent. The other end of this interaction needs more consideration; the present “Please do not camp within sight of the road.” does not work. The problem of unnecessary consumption of wild country quality by tenters is especially severe given the bright colors of many tents.
- f. Shouldn’t the use of power drills for climbing activities be prohibited in the Old Park as well as in the additions and the preserve?
- g. In developing Research Criteria and Guidelines I hope that the value of soundly planned and executed work will be recognized. The opportunity for study of the whole system at DNPP is nearly unique and should be recognized; the results are important for both management and for comparison with areas outside DNPP. I agree that research should be done carefully and as unobtrusively as possible. However, at times some intrusion should be accepted, especially if the impact is short-lived.
- h. The use of horses, probably most likely with guided trips, should be incorporated very carefully since these activities become a factor in the transport of invasive plants.
- i. It seems that a considerable body of published material on bears in Denali was not referenced. This is natural to the extent that the information may not have had direct applicability to specific topics in this report. However, some of the published material would appear to have been as, or more, relevant than material that was cited from work done well outside the region.
- j. The listings in the references are inconsistent in format and completeness. For anyone relatively unfamiliar with this material, especially the “grey literature”, it would be difficult to make much of many citations as given.

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Response to Comments

Dean-7

Visual impacts were not specifically utilized for indicators or as an impact topic in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences. However, other indicators of use density (such as Encounters with Other People and Camping Density) would reflect the visual impact of camping, which is intended. For efficiency, individual indicators should stand in for as many variables as possible. The analysis of impacts to wilderness resources in chapter 4 should also provide adequate guidance for overall impacts, even though visual impacts are not specifically addressed.

Dean-8

The Wilderness Act already prohibits power drills within the Denali Wilderness, so there is no need for further action.

Dean-9

The National Park Service believes the *Final EIS* contains the most relevant information related to bears and the topics discussed in the plan. The commenter did not provide specific examples of the material he believes to have been omitted.

Comments



DENALI NATIONAL PARK
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July 5, 2005

Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
Post Office Box 9
Denali National Park, AK 99755

RE: Comments to the 2005 Revised Draft of the Denali Backcountry
Management Plan

Dear Mr. Anderson:

We commend the framers of the Revised Draft of the Denali Backcountry Management Plan (DBCMP). The more measurable objectives of this plan should increase the Service's effectiveness in determining if, when, and what management tools need to be applied. Further, the Service's intention to utilize NPS/public sector working groups, if well facilitated, can increase buy-in of desired future conditions and build consensus around more innovative management tools than the agency may always be able to develop internally. Park administrators must make sure that monitoring protocols are both practical and fiscally achievable over the life of the plan. A twenty-year plan is only as good as the agency's ability to monitor its success and to implement appropriate management tools if necessary.

Management Areas

Kantishna Region

We endorse the "People for the Parks Alternative" for management plan areas. In particular, the Kantishna region of Denali National Park and Preserve should be managed as defined for Management Area B for the following reasons:

- Currently, the Kantishna region has a much lower level of human impact than what the Service considers acceptable over the next twenty years. Backcountry users still experience resource and social conditions that resemble the minimally accepted standards for Management Area B.
 - Except for the existence of a few mining trails, the backcountry is remote and requires self reliance.
 - Although four visitor facilities could put as many as 150 park visitors into the backcountry each day, not all are backcountry users; some confine themselves to the road corridor, and some never even leave the lodges' premises. In reality, encounters with people in the backcountry are low.

An Unparalleled Setting • An Uncommon Experience

Response to Comments

DNPWC-1

See DCC-34.

503

1

Comments

- Visitors have at most three encounters with modern equipment or landscape modifications each day of their stay in the area, and most visitors have no more than one encounter.
- No human waste, toilet paper, or litter is encountered.
- Natural sounds predominate with motorized noise intrusions rare and usually faint. Because there is an airstrip and a commercial air service provider in the area, the Service seems to assume continued growth and soundscape deterioration over the next twenty years. To us, this is not an acceptable management direction and need not be the outcome if future concessions contracts are managed appropriately and the airstrip is maintained as a remote landing strip.
- This management plan's goals for the region have changed from past direction:
 - Planning documents in 1986 and 1997 speak to retaining use of this area to the levels that existed when each of those plans was developed. The 1986 General Management Plan stated that "any further development of commercial visitor facilities on private land in the Kantishna mining district will be considered incompatible with the planned purposes of the park..." (1986 GMP, page 17) The 1997 Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan (Front Country DCP/EIS) repeated that concept when the Service stated that it would "acquire development rights and/or property to retain the existing character and approximate level of commercial use at Kantishna." (1997 Front Country DCP/EIS, page 31)
 - The region's backcountry units, which were originally designed without limits, were subsequently limited to twelve each.
 - The National Park Service (NPS) continues to buy out patented mining claims in order to preclude additional commercial development.
 - Through this plan, NPS intends to restrict future commercial guided activities to 2004 levels.

In summary, this area, the geographic heart of Denali National Park and Preserve, is valued because of its remote character. The Service's preferred alternative will negatively impact the natural resource values of the region which, in turn, will negatively affect our business. We take exception to placing the Kantishna in a management area category that provides for any more natural sound disturbance, camping density, and encounters with people and large groups over the next twenty years than occurs today.

Access / Wilderness Management

Areas found suitable for future wilderness designation must be managed in such a way that they remain unimpaired for future consideration as designated wilderness. Only the access provisions in Alternative 2 can hope to achieve that mandate (NPS Management Policies, Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1):

- Define traditional activities for the park additions as for the "old park"
- Modify current regulations to restrict airplane and motorboat use only for traditional activities. (In addition, close Wonder Lake to summer airplane landings and use of motorboats, using management guidelines for "special resource and social conditions".)

Response to Comments

Comments

- Allow airplane landings only at designated portals and the McKinley Park and Kantishna airstrips
- Register all day-hikers
- Restrict permits for climbing Mount McKinley to the existing level of 1300.
- No overland corridors

Commercial Services

Education

Education of national park visitors is one of the most powerful tools the Service can use to achieve its mission. The educational role of our national parks was emphasized by the late Yale historian and historical scholar of the national park system, Dr. Robin Winks, when he said that our national parks represent the world's greatest outdoor universities. Education is given little emphasis in this plan except as it relates to public understanding of "wilderness resource values" protected in the Denali backcountry. According to the plan, "education would focus on interpreting the wilderness resource values articulated in the Wilderness Management section of this plan." (page 58) We do not underestimate the importance of communicating the values of wilderness. In addition, though, for topics such as geology, glaciology, wildlife and plant ecology, and the history of man in northern environments, Denali is one of the world's most outstanding outdoor classrooms. Indeed, the park is being used as such by the NPS and certain of its non-profit and for-profit partners to educate park visitors about the natural and cultural resources of subarctic ecosystems. Education as a goal of backcountry management should be addressed with just as much thought and planning as recreation has been given.

Educational services vs. commercial activities that include education

The framers of the Revised Draft DBCMP characterize the NPS, educational non-profit organizations, and accredited institutions as having education as their primary purpose. On the other hand the framers presume that for-profit entities operating in the park cannot have education as a primary purpose. Although for-profits are generally thought to be established around a profit-making motive, they can be driven by other missions, including education. The following differentiations are used in the management plan:

- "Educational activities" vs. "commercial services" (page 2)
- "Educational programs" vs. "guided hiking activities" (page 2)
- "Educational group hiking" vs. "guided group hiking" (page 36)

Later in the plan, the following statement is made:

Although many concession-guided activities are also educational, these [following] programs are distinguished as having education as a primary purpose and being offered by the Murie Science and Learning Center (MSLC), non-profit organizations operating in the park under a cooperative agreement, accredited institutions or the National Park Service itself. (Revised Draft DBCMP, page 184)

We propose that our business does not fit the Revised Draft DBCMP definition of a commercial concession-guided activities provider that is "also educational" and do far more than meet the minimum educational criteria set for commercial services (page 56):

Response to Comments

Comments

1. Education drives our vision, our mission, goals, and action plans. It guides our marketing, staff training, and defines the ways in which we assist park visitors in their Denali experience. The following excerpt from our 2001 strategic plan reads:

| | |
|--|--|
| <u>Vision</u> | An informed public will be responsible stewards of the natural world. |
| <u>Mission</u> | Providing active learning opportunities and fostering stewardship of the natural world through a tradition of excellence, community, and place |
| <u>Goal relating to guest experience</u> | To provide Denali National Park visitors the best in active learning experiences related to the natural and cultural heritage of the circumpolar north |

2. Our business has long been recognized by the NPS as an educational entity. When we purchased Camp Denali, Regional Director, Brian Harry, wrote in 1976:

Camp Denali should be allowed to function in its present status as long as it remains an environmental education facility rather than an overnight accommodation destination point.

When our uses in the “old park” were granted, those field trips did not just have to have an educational component, their very purpose had to be education. In 1987, the Service granted Camp Denali an extension of its traditional educational program in the “old park” to guests at North Face lodge based on our intention to provide “the same or similar visitor services” under Section 1307 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. In the 1990s it was the education model of Camp Denali/North Face Lodge that spawned Superintendent Steve Martin’s vision for the Murie Science and Learning Center (MSLC).

3. Our commitment to education is demonstrated through our philanthropic efforts. We provided seed money and in-kind support totaling nearly \$100,000 per year over five years to start the educational programs that are now offered through the MSLC. Today, Camp Denali and North Face Lodge guests, along with a 100% company match, contribute over \$24,000 per year toward the continued operation of the MSLC’s education component. Over the past three years, an average of an additional \$50,000 per year has been contributed by these guests through the use of our mailing list for semi-annual appeals of the Alaska Natural History Association. Twenty thousand dollars per year of in-kind support assists the operation of a migration station that monitors songbirds and an accredited Alaska Field Course through the MSLC.

Our mission and actions supporting that mission demonstrate a singular commitment to education that sets Camp Denali/North Face Lodge apart from other commercial services operating in Denali National Park and Preserve. We view ourselves as a full-fledged, for-profit partner in education. In fact, for several years we have advocated that the Service include our educational program as part of our concession evaluation. We are not aware that the NPS has developed such a template.

Response to Comments

Comments

Using the Revised Draft of the DBCMP, we suggest that the Service consider designing a set of education-related criteria that define a fully integrated education partner to be included in our next concessions contract. Using those criteria, any such partner, along with the interpretive arm of the Service itself, would be evaluated annually to assure continued standing. The MSLC could provide training and certification for all the park's educators – whether a fully integrated education program provider or an entity that also provides educational services. Such a system could significantly enhance the quality of education in Denali National Park and Preserve and could become a model (as did public transportation) for the entire national park system.

2

Partnership vs. hierarchy

The plan states that when the Service must restrict group activities, priority is given to NPS discovery hikes, then to the MSLC, then to other non-profit entities, and last of all to for-profit (commercial) services. (page 57) A partnership is mutually beneficial, not hierarchical, because each entity brings to the achievement of a common mission what the other cannot accomplish alone. Formation of a working group to address social trail problem areas is a positive proposal. However, this process would be more productive if participants did not perceive that they were coming to the table with a “pecking order” in place.

3

Applicable laws, regulations, policies for guided activities and commercial services (page 22)
Section 1307 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) should be included as an applicable law. It guides the activities of “historic operators” and would have to be applied in the implementation of this management plan. For instance, available capacity for guided activities and educational programs should include historic operators. (Revised Draft BCDMP, page 57)

4

Relative to our historic operator status under ANILCA, an oblique reference to Camp Denali/North Face Lodge appeared in an addendum of the plan as a response to comments from Alaska Wildland Adventures:

While there is one operator who is entitled by law to offer guided hiking at the level offered in 1979, the extra increment added since 1979 by that concessioner would be subject to competition under NPS concessions law in the next contract period.
(Revised Draft DCMP, page 460)

Since our purchase of North Face Lodge in 1987, we have understood that all our “old park” activities were included under our historic operator status. Until reading through the addendum of this management plan, we were unaware that the Service viewed this differently. In our opinion, this is an issue that needs to be discussed and resolved between us and the NPS. We suggest that, given the timing of this management plan and its primary objectives, it is an inappropriate place for such a public notice.

Overflights / Commercial Airplane Landings

We understand the lack of control the Service has over park air space. We also know by experience how air traffic has grown from a novel sight in the backcountry to the point that it now disrupts the wilderness experience of park visitors. In our opinion, overflights in Alaska's

Response to Comments

DNPWC-2

The modified preferred alternative includes criteria for commercial services in the Denali backcountry that emphasize the importance of education as a prerequisite for commercial use. All NPS concessioners (other than transport services) would be expected to provide education about park resources and values as part of their operating plan. The National Park Service greatly appreciates the efforts of concessioners who go beyond the requirements and set a standard for others, but our goal is for all commercial service providers to be “fully integrated educational partners.”

DNPWC-3

See DCC-41.

DNPWC-4

Section 1307 of ANILCA is described in the chapter 1 of the *Final EIS*.

Comments

national parks should be managed to include flight corridors and flight-free zones. We encourage the Service to engage in vigorous efforts to protect Denali's soundscape through aviation working group consensus *and* through discussions with other agencies, such as the Federal Aviation Administration, as well as the Alaska delegation.

With respect to commercial airplane landings, we advocate that Alternative 2 guide the management of Denali National Park and Preserve over the next twenty years.

Guided Day Hiking

1. *Level*

The management tool described in the preferred alternative is not practical. The plan states that, "guided day-hiking could be offered in the old park with no more than the 2004 number of guided groups each season and using a similar proportion of off-trail to on-trail hikes." (page 72 and others) The occupancy of Camp Denali/North Face Lodge was not at capacity in 2004 as it was in the 1990s. Rather than selecting one year as a baseline, it is more reasonable to use the busiest business cycle over the past ten years. Additionally, because the MSLC is a new entity, use of the 2004 numbers would be premature.

The following solution could be considered. Apart from the NPS "Discovery Hike" program, this scenario utilizes the MSLC as the fee-based education program provider for the east end of the park and Camp Denali/North Face Lodge as the education program provider for the west end of the park:

| | |
|---|--|
| NPS Discovery Hike Program | free ranger-led hikes throughout the park for individuals |
| Camp Denali/North Face Lodge | fee based; fixed at the level of use in busiest business cycle between 1994 and 2004; west end provider of educational programs for Camp Denali/North Face Lodge park visitors, including educational field trips/hikes with general use from west end to Toklat |
| MSLC | establish same level as Camp Denali/North Face Lodge uses; east end provider of fee-based, educational programs, including educational field trips/hikes with general use from east end to Toklat |
| Kantishna Roadhouse, Denali Backcountry Lodge | fixed at the level of use in busiest business cycle between 1994 and 2004; fee-based use of park additions and prescribed use of McKinley Bar Trail in old park for educational guided hiking |
| Other organized group entities requesting to do backcountry guided hiking | provided for by fee for service day use backcountry educational guided hiking programs of the MSLC – reservation required; based from the east end |

Response to Comments

DNPWC-5

The modified preferred alternative indicates that the maximum number of guided groups in the Old Park backcountry (other than those on trails in the Wonder Lake area) would be determined by an average of the last five seasons (2001-2005) rather than a single year that might not represent usage or related impacts. A 5-season average provides a reasonable picture of the amount of use that is responsible for the resource and social impacts seen on the ground. The conclusion of this EIS is that the degree of impact from current levels of guided hiking in the Old Park is manageable, but no further impacts should occur. Since many of the resource impacts accumulate over time, an average of 5 years is a more appropriate methodology for determining a limit than the suggested tool of choosing the busiest year from the last 10 years. The 5-season average has been used to set limits on commercial airplane landings at the Kantishna and McKinley Park strips. The proposed restriction on the number of guided hikes applies only to commercially authorized groups; the MSLC would be addressed separately.

DNPWC-6

The National Park Service cannot select a particular commercial services provider in a planning document, but must follow the procedures outlined in regulation. The BCMP appropriately defines types, levels, and allocation of use in various areas of the backcountry as indicated by management area designation and present and projected future use levels. The BCMP provides guidance on what commercial guided day hiking could be considered necessary and appropriate, and the National Park Service intends to issue prospectuses for some of these services after the Record of Decision for the plan is signed. The MSLC is not a commercial visitor service and the scope of its activities is determined by its mission, not a geographic range within the park. However, its activities are also constrained by management area standards.

Comments

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 2. | <i>On-trail vs. off-trail hiking</i> Does this mean half of the groups on-trail and half off-trail or does the statement refer to the 2004 proportion of off-trail to on-trail groups? We presume it to mean the latter. The meaning should be more clearly articulated. | 7 |
| 3. | <i>What constitutes a trail</i> Is a trail defined specifically as constructed and maintained? Does a trail include well-worn and generally utilized social trails? Two constructed, maintained trails are given as examples, but the discussion should more clearly indicate what is meant. | |
| 4. | <i>Maximum of twelve participants including a guide</i> We endorse this backcountry management tool and agree with the change from the original draft that provided for larger groups closer to the road. We would, however, advocate for a <i>seasonal average</i> of twelve participants including a guide for the following reasons: | 8 |
- In our experience, a group of field trip participants may be made up of couples, so a maximum of twelve total may eliminate not just one, but two from a group.
 - For many years we have hosted photography workshops, sometimes organized by other businesses that utilize a photographic educator. Airlines and lodging facilities will only provide price discounts for a minimum of fifteen participants. Their use of the park is either along the road corridor or to within about 150 feet of the road.

If an average of twelve participants including a guide is too difficult to manage, the Service could retain the current wording but allow for special situations to be negotiated in concessions contracts.

Backcountry Facilities

Campsites

We are against the proposal to establish up to five designated remote campsites in the Kantishna region of the park. The following considerations should be included in a larger discussion of the long term management of the Kantishna region before designated campsites are planned:

- proximity to private land and interruption of surrounding wilderness from established commercial facilities and private dwellings
- compatibility of day hikers, both independent and commercially guided, with backcountry campsite users
- compatibility of day hiking destinations with backcountry campsite locations
- necessity of restroom facilities and site accessibility for service
- park visitor "market" / "need" for this type of use, given the existence of the Wonder Lake Campground and backcountry units
- Visitor Transportation System schedule – campsites situated within reasonable distance from the road especially during the darker nights of August and September
- compatibility of backcountry campsites and users with subsistence hunters
- backcountry campsites in addition to or to replace backcountry permits for the affected units – discuss the total user impact for this region of the park at any one time

Response to Comments

DNPWC-7

The sections where the confusing references to trails appeared have been removed from the modified preferred alternative.

DNPWC-8

The group size limits were based on the best judgment of NPS resource managers, considering both physical and wilderness resources. It is important to note that the limit is a maximum, not a requirement, so a group of 5 couples and a guide would still be a viable party size. For the described photography workshop, as long as most of the party stayed within 150 feet of the park road, they would not be in the backcountry and the group size limits would not apply.

DNPWC-9

The text has been clarified to indicate that the backcountry campsites in Kantishna would be located "farther from the park road than the areas commonly used by day-hikers." Among the goals for the backcountry campsites is to pull the overnight backpackers out of the area used by the Kantishna lodges and day hikers, and provide a base for overnight backpackers to set up camp and explore other areas of the Kantishna. The National Park Service envisions that these sites would serve a portion of the overnight backcountry users already permitted in backcountry units 41-43, and the quotas governing the amount of dispersed overnight use would be adjusted to assure management area standards are achieved. In no case would management area standards be exceeded in this area, insuring that wilderness character would be protected.

The other concerns about restroom facilities, accessibility for service, VTS schedule, and subsistence conflicts are valid and important but are unlikely to provide insurmountable obstacles to implementation. The National Park Service intends to complete an implementation plan addressing both the formalization of the trail system in the Kantishna area as well as the siting and development of the designated campsites, and these issues would be addressed in that process.

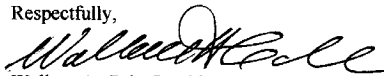
Comments

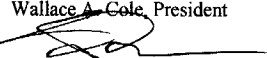
- educational program and/or commercial use vs. availability for individuals (Note: By mutual agreement, in 1975 Camp Denali gave up commercial overnight backcountry camping due to concerns about space availability for individual park users. If backcountry sites are available for commercial use, will this change in policy be managed to assure adequate individual visitor use?)
- prior park planning documents that sought to manage the center of the park as a low impact, small scale destination that did not diminish its wilderness character

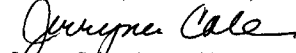
In the 1997 Front Country Plan, remote campsites were to be constructed based on visitor demand and resource protection needs. (Front Country DCP/EIS, 1997, page 31) In this present plan, construction of these sites is based on a different premise – that of providing a “different experience than is presently available which would appeal to some visitors who prefer to reduce uncertainty and difficulty in selecting a backcountry campsite.” (Revised Draft DCMP, page 399) In our view, the Wonder Lake Campground provides that kind of experience. The backcountry units in the Kantishna Hills, with their present limits, provide the next level of an encounter with wilderness, and resource impacts and have not yet suggested a need for designated campsites.

In closing, we appreciate the efforts of all who were involved in the careful redrafting of this management plan and thank the NPS for the opportunity to comment on its content. Our comments will hopefully assist the Service in producing a workable, final tool for the management of the backcountry of Denali National Park and Preserve. Please contact us with questions and/or clarification of our remarks.

Respectfully,


Wallace A. Cole, President


Simon Hamm, Vice President, General Manager


Jerryne Cole, Vice President

Jenna Hamm, Vice President



Response to Comments

Comments



July 15, 2005

Mr. Paul Anderson, Superintendent
National Park Service
Denali Park & Preserve
P. O. Box 9
Denali Park, Alaska 99755

Dear Paul,

This serves as the Doyon/ARAMARK Denali National Park Concession Joint Venture's comments to the Denali National Park and Preserve Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan (RDBMP) document issued April 2005.

The Doyon/ARAMARK Joint Venture supports Alternative 4, as stated in the RDBMP. We agree that this alternative provides the appropriate response to expand visitor experiences and opportunities within the Wilderness portions of the Park, as defined in the RDBMP, while maintaining the wilderness values this great Park was set aside to preserve.

However, the Doyon/ARAMARK Joint Venture is compelled to comment about language contained in the chapter 2, Actions Common page 57 under Commercial Services. While the Joint Venture supports that NPS Ranger led hikes have the first priority for providing guided activities and education services, that NPS strongly reconsider the remaining hierarchy as stated in priority order 2-4.

The Joint Venture recommends that language be incorporated allowing on a case by cases basis an evaluation of the appropriate entity for providing these services, in cases where NPS cannot do so. For-profit businesses and specifically, the Doyon/ARAMARK Joint Venture may be better suited to provide these services than the MSLC and/or accredited educational organizations operating under a cooperating agreement for the following reasons:

- The Joint Venture has a demonstrated understanding of adhering to backcountry travel protocols that result in minimal impact to the wilderness resources as adopted and defined by NPS here at Denali. On the other hand, our staff has on numerous occasions observed other groups with certain concession permits not follow these protocols, e.g. hiking in a group single file vs. spread out laterally so as to not encourage social trails from developing. The many social trails that exist in the West District of the Park are a result of single file hiking.
- The Joint Venture has a demonstrated knowledge of managing people, their food and behavior that minimizes harmful interactions with wildlife. We have demonstrated this consistently with our tour product for the past 3 years associated with this contract and the previous 20 while operating as ARAMARK.

Response to Comments

DAJV-1

See DCC-41.

Comments

- Our Environmental Management System is certified to the ISO 14001 standard. Any guided activities the Joint Venture may undertake would expand the scope of our EMS to include these activities. As such, these activities would be subjected to re-occurring audits to ensure compliance with the standard. This ensures activities led by the Concessioner are benchmarked for environmental performance with measurable objectives and targets identified designed to achieve continual improvement in this area. The ISO 14001 standard requires this.
- The Concessioner and many of the staff the Joint Venture currently employs has a demonstrated competency in providing environmental education programs and guided hikes. It was the Concessioner who started the Denali Foundation in the late 1980's. It started with developing and implementing Denali Elderhostel programs in 1985. These programs led to the development of the Denali Foundation which has grown and diversified over the past 20 years. For many of these years, particularly the first 10 it was concession staff who taught the EH programs and led guided hikes and other activities associated with this program. The Concessioner has also provided environmental education programs for school groups prior to the current Denali and Discovery Day programs. Now, the Concessioner supports these programs with donated transportation services.

The Doyon/ARAMARK Joint Venture understands that the language as written on page 57 of the RDBMP needs to be enduring and ensure the appropriate entities are "protected." However, because in our opinion the Doyon/ARAMARK Joint Venture is unique in its competencies regarding environmental education and interpretation, so long as these competencies remain the Joint Venture should be considered equally with other entities for opportunities to provide guided activities and educational programs. This could be achieved if the last section of COMMERCIAL SERVICES, page 57 be re-written identifying a process whereas entities that might compete for these opportunities be allowed to do so and awarded based on actual ability and competency, rather than organizational type.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,

Dominic Canale
District Manager
Doyon/ARAMARK Denali National Park Concession Joint Venture

Response to Comments

Comments

To:
Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali National Park, Alaska 99755

May 30, 2003

From:
Gordon Haber
P.O. Box 64
Denali National Park, Alaska 99755
[REDACTED]

Sent as a PDF file via e-mail

Re: Comments on Denali Draft Backcountry Management Plan

My primary concern about the Draft Backcountry Management Plan for Denali National Park and Preserve (February 2003) is that it poorly represents the world-class wildlife values of the area and potential impacts of the various management alternatives on these values.

It should be remembered that Denali National Park was created in 1917 primarily for its wildlife values, and that most of the boundary alterations over the decades – especially under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 – were intended to provide greater protection for wildlife and wildlife habitat. It was specifically because of recognition that the “old park” north boundary area from Healy to the Kantishna Hills was so important to the integrity of core park wildlife systems but was inadequately protected that the entire “d-2” provision of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act began receiving major attention in the mid 1970s. This happened through the efforts of Ann Morton, via her husband Rogers Morton, then Secretary of the Interior, because of Ann’s trips to Denali for three successive winters and one fall, 1972-1975, to observe wolves. This provided her with a first-hand understanding of the north boundary area as wintering habitat for Denali caribou, moose, sheep, and wolves.

Thus it is surprising to find almost nothing in the Plan about the wildlife importance of this area and the need to ensure that it remains free of development and other incompatible encroachments – i.e., “Stampede Flats” (Healy to Kantishna Hills, from the Outer Range north to and including the Outer-Outer Range [next set of foothills, north of the Stampede Trail]). This becomes all the more important in view of recent state and federal initiatives toward road and/or railroad access to Wonder Lake through the area and the creeping westward expansion of residential subdivisions from Healy. The Plan should take the lead in calling attention to resulting problems for Denali’s wildlife.

Response to Comments

Haber-1

The area of the “wolf townships” is outside the park boundary, and therefore outside of the scope of this plan. However, the wolf townships have long been recognized for their ecological importance to Denali. The 1986 General Management Plan included a land protection plan in which this area was considered the highest priority for protection. For topics outside of the scope of the backcountry management plan, the 1986 GMP and the accompanying Land Protection Plan still apply.

Comments

2

The Plan should propose levels of wildlife habitat protection for this area comparable if not equal to what exist for the “road corridor” and other interior areas of Denali, because it is integral to protecting wildlife that seasonally shift or migrate from these areas. It should advocate resumed negotiations for a land trade, cooperative management, or other means to guarantee the same protection for the state-owned “wolf townships” that extend from Healy almost to the Sushana River (i.e., the lands designated an “Area of Ecological Concern” in ANILCA).

Denali and sometimes other caribou use Stampede Flats heavily by mid winter in most years, probably largely because the wind patterns of this area tend to prevent as much snow buildup and thus allow easier foraging vis-à-vis surrounding areas. Likewise, as snow depths reach threshold levels in the road corridor areas there are major temporary northward shifts of moose and sheep to the north side of the Outer Range and southern areas of Stampede Flats. And this ungulate activity draws major segments of the park wolf population for varying winter periods. Not uncommonly at least 5-6 of the dozen or so groups of wolves that reside primarily in other areas of the north-side park/preserve shift or migrate to Stampede Flats for increased winter hunting opportunities, related to this heightened ungulate (especially caribou) activity.

A substantial portion of this migratory activity originates from the Kantishna Hills and south and west of Wonder Lake. As caribou from the Wonder Lake area and west migrate northeastward across the Clearwater Fork-Stony Creek drainages into Stampede Flats, wolves soon begin following from these areas, sometimes making several trips back and forth and going as far east as the Savage River area and, in at least two cases since 1999, even to Jumbo Dome (northeast of Healy). At least two groups of wolves from the Muddy River-Wonder Lake-Moose Creek area undertake eastward migrations into Stampede Flats regularly, and several others do so sporadically. Last winter (2002-03) the latter included a group of 12 from the Muddy River-Foraker River area and nine from northwest of Kantishna (this group also seems to be expanding or shifting its territory somewhat eastward, into the southern Kantishna Hills). Most management concerns about Denali wolves focus on northward and eastward winter shifts and forays by the eastern road corridor groups – Toklat/East Fork and a succession of groups to the east (Savage-Headquarters-Sanctuary-Margaret). However it should be emphasized that the winter importance of Stampede Flats heavily influences wolves and other wildlife from areas much further to the west as well. Inadequate protection and continuing ecological erosion of this area imply serious ecological consequences for traditional wildlife patterns over much larger areas of the park/preserve.

The 80-100 wolves that reside primarily within the north-side park/preserve are of well-established ecological, scientific, and visitor-viewing importance. Yet, not only does the Plan

Response to Comments

Haber-2

The BCMP is primarily a plan for managing recreational use of the backcountry, not for managing wildlife. The impacts of plan actions on wolves and other wildlife species are considered in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences, but specific actions related to wildlife management are outside the scope of this GMP amendment.

2

Comments

3

slight Denali wolves (and other wildlife) via its inattention to the importance of Stampede Flats, it also fails to address crucial needs with regard to the continuing vulnerability of these wolves, including the oldest family lineages, to hunting, trapping, dog-related, and other human impacts, inside the “old park” and 1980 park additions as well as outside. One suspects this is related to the selective, indeed pitifully inadequate, use of the large amount of wolf and wolf-ungulate research information that is available for Denali. Citations to a few bits and pieces of this research – published and unpublished – appear here and there haphazardly. Notably, not a single reference to *any* of my Denali wolf-ungulate research appears in the 464-page Plan, even though this research is current, has been ongoing for 38 years, and has produced more published and otherwise-reported results than any other source. This includes published challenges to some of the research the Plan *does* cite. This is not the place to try to plug such a gaping hole. Suffice it here for me to offer to meet with the Plan’s authors to whatever extent is necessary to ensure that the next draft adequately incorporates this and other research, including current radio-tracking data related to the importance of Stampede Flats and results pertinent to hunting, trapping, dog, and other human impacts.

G.H.

Response to Comments

Comments



July 15, 2005

Mr. Paul Anderson
Superintendent
Denali National Park
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Dear Paul,

Below, please find our company's comments that are intended to support or further emphasize issues outlined in the Talkeetna Air Tour Industry's comments or to address concerns that are specific to K2 Aviation.

K2 Aviation's Objective:

Work with National Park Service to maintain environmental integrity and enhance quality of visitor experience in Denali National Park. K2 Aviation does not support any of alternatives outlined in the Denali Backcountry Draft Plan.

Air Tour Overflights and Restrictions - Concerns

NPS is identifying areas for different levels of allowable sound disturbance. The "soundscape" will be monitored following the implementation of the Denali Backcountry plan and recommendations for change will be made at the end of a five-year period.

Our Concern:

We are concerned that this could lead to regulation of flight routes and limit accessibility in the future. Additionally, we question why NPS feels it necessary to designate quiet areas on the southside of Denali when it is only accessible by airplane. Moreover, how important is it to keep areas quiet if there is no one there to hear the noise?

Changing the environment by recording glacier landings:

When the Talkeetna air services were concessioned, NPS began to track landings and suggested that future quotas may be based on these numbers.



Denali National Park
Talkeetna Ranger Station
JUL 15 2005
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537

1

Response to Comments

K2-1

The Access section of the BCMP provides a variety of tools that could be used to manage airplane access in the future if necessary. The text under AT-4 addresses the question of managing areas for natural soundscapes even when airplanes are the only means of access. The modified preferred alternative does not propose to eliminate air taxi access anywhere in the park additions and preserve; a certain amount of noise is tolerated in all management areas in order to provide reasonable access to wilderness recreational activities.

Comments

Our Concern:

While we do not object to NPS's efforts to monitor landings, we are deeply concerned that visitor safety may be compromised if landing records generated from such monitoring are used to establish future landing quotas. For instance, some operators may be tempted to increase their normal number of landings and perhaps even continue to land before and after the regular season, when glacier conditions are not safe for landing, in order to boost their numbers and increase their future landing allocation.

Limiting Scenic Landings

NPS has agreed to establish a work group to look for ways to decrease noise in certain areas. NPS representatives have been tracking glacier landings and have indicated that they will be capping them in the future.

Our Concern:

- We would like to see the composition of the work group defined and balanced with appropriate members.
- Glacier landings provide virtually the only access to the south side of a largely inaccessible park with minimal impact to the environment or users.
- Limiting the number of glacier landing passengers conflicts with NPS goals to reduce noise. It increases the volume of over flights because airplanes will fly more trips when they are not spending time parked on glaciers. Limiting the number of glacier landing passengers has no effect on noise.
- Limiting the number of glacier landing passengers will make glacier landings unaffordable for the flightseeing passenger and climber.
- Scenic landings provide the most access for the public into the southside of Denali. NPS has expressed concern that noise may affect climber's experience or those scenic landing passengers. We feel that it not right to favor climbers and their desire for solitude given that they access the park by airplane. As far as the scenic landings passenger's experience, there has been no data to date to indicate this is an issue.

Commercial Airplane Landings:

In the preferred alternative #4, National Park Service has restricted scenic air tour landings yet has imposed no restrictions on climber related landings in the park. The Pika and Eldridge Glaciers (which have a history of use by both climbers and tourists) are being restricted for scenic landings when mountaineers are present. Scenic landings are restricted

Response to Comments

K2-2

Although this suggestion appeared in the original draft of the BCMP, it did not appear in any alternative in the revised draft.

K2-3

The National Park Service does not propose limiting the number of glacier landings in the modified preferred alternative, although establishing limits remains an option for the future. The primary concern is to mitigate the noise from airplanes, along with minimizing the number of encounters on the ground with motorized/mechanized equipment. The number of glacier landings could continue to grow given quieter equipment; the number of passengers could continue to grow given more efficient seating and larger planes (see AAC-15). The National Park Service intends to work with the Aircraft Overflights Working Group to address noise from aircraft that do not land. The Working Group would represent all interests in aircraft overflights and would be constituted appropriately under the Federal Advisory Committee Act. Although it is true that the National Park Service does not have regulatory authority over the park's airspace, establishing geographic limits on landing areas can have a positive effect on portions of the natural soundscape in the Alaska Range; for example, large numbers of scenic air tours would not fly over areas such as the Eldridge Glacier unless they were going there to land.

Although the National Park Service is concerned about potential impacts to scenic air tour passengers' experience from high traffic volumes around glacier landing areas, this issue is not advanced as a driving concern for the alternatives proposed in the *Revised Draft EIS* or *Final EIS*. Thus, no data were provided that would reflect on the issue.

K2-4

See AT-12.

Comments

to Management Area A. All the landing traffic would be funneled to the Ruth Glacier.

Our Concern:

The glaciers are dynamic. We do not know that the Ruth Glacier will continue to be the best place to land in future. Additionally, we object to restricting scenic landings at the Eldridge and Pika Glaciers when they have historical use for both scenic landings and climbers. Who is to say that the Eldridge may not be the best place to land scenics in the future?

5

Denali National Park Growth

One of the primary reasons for the Denali Backcountry Plan is to deal with future growth in the park. In the past five years, it is our understanding that DNP actually saw a decrease in numbers. We understand that the Denali Backcountry plan would only be implemented when numbers are increasing.


Our Concern:

I am concerned by implementation of any limits without NPS demonstrating an increase in numbers.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our comments.

Sincerely,


Todd Rust


Suzanne Rust

Denali National Park
Talkeetna Ranger Station
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Response to Comments

K2-5

See AT-10.

Comments

Superintendent
Denali National Park
PO Box 9
Denali National Park, Ak 99755



7/15/05

Re: BCMP Comment

Dear Sir,

My comment deals specifically with the issue of over-flight restrictions. I am not in favor of any change that would specify exact routes, exclude any sizeable area from over-flight, or otherwise limit flightseeing activities. My position is based on 12 years experience as a professional pilot in Denali, and includes the following points:

1. Safety and regulatory aspects of over-flight are already adequately addressed by FAA rules, common operating practice, and voluntary procedural compliance by local businesses. The mechanism already exists to implement and enforce any change that may be required for these reasons in the future.
2. Most flightseeing passengers are not "backpacker/outdoorsy" types. They are predominantly middle-aged (or older) vacationers who want to "see" the park—not "use" it. They have spent their whole lives paying for these parks. They should not be disenfranchised (or made to sit in a bus for hours).
3. The goal of environmental preservation is well-served by aviation. Aircraft don't trample tundra, harass wildlife, leave trash, etc. Aviation provides a clean way to provide public access to public assets.
4. The public is well-served by aircraft that are free to provide the best experience possible. Localized weather conditions that require flexible routing are a greater factor in Denali than they are over the Grand Canyon (or other controlled-flight areas). Constrained routes or procedures would only degrade the quality of the passengers' experience.

I do not favor an airborne free-for-all (which would be in nobody's best interest). I am aware of the controversy over aircraft noise. I feel that this issue, and others, is more properly addressed on a case-by-case, communicate, compromise, and comply basis, than by the best efforts of bureaucrats, looking far into the future, to determine any particular requirement. Of the available alternatives, I favor a **NO CHANGE TO CURRENT POLICY** course of action. I would be pleased to discuss this matter at any time.

Sincerely,

James D. Morgan

Response to Comments

Morgan-1

FAA regulations are intended to provide aircraft and passenger safety in the Denali airspace as well as everywhere else in the United States. However, FAA regulations do not generally address resource protection concerns in national parks or the experiences and safety of park visitors on the ground, particularly in the unusual conditions around glacier landing areas in the Alaska Range. Such concerns are appropriate topics for consideration within the Denali BCMP.

Morgan-2

The preferred alternative of the *Revised Draft EIS* and the modified preferred alternative of the *Final EIS* take into account the many park visitors who would like to experience the resources and values of the Denali backcountry but are not capable of backcountry travel without assistance. The modified preferred alternative provides opportunities for those visitors, including opportunities to use airplanes to land within park boundaries.

Morgan-3

Aircraft access is environmentally friendly in the ways cited by the commenter. However, aircraft are not without impacts to park resources. Particularly in an area renowned for its wilderness resource values, the noise and presence of aircraft have substantial impacts on park resources and visitor experience. These impacts are documented in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences.

Morgan-4

The National Park Service agrees that the public should be provided with the best experience possible, with two qualifiers. First, the National Park Service is responsible for protecting park resources, and those resources are defined by statute. The National Park Service mandate is to provide the best visitor experience possible consistent with protection of resources. Second, the National Park Service often has multiple user groups, and providing the best experience for one may reduce the quality of the experience for others. This planning process should help the National Park Service provide the best possible experience for all user groups, in part by reducing these types of user conflicts. Aircraft routing is one possible tool that could be used to accomplish resource protection and to reduce user conflict, although it is certainly not the only tool. The modified preferred

response continued on next page

Comments

Paul R. Anderson, Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P. O. Box 9
Denali National Park, AK 99755
DENA_BC_Plan_Comments@nps.gov

Comments on Revised Draft EIS on Denali backcountry plan (26 June 2005)

Dear Mr. Anderson:

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the 575 page Revised Draft EIS of April 2005. I first visited Denali National Park in 1985 when I established Alaska residency and have visited it many times since in both summer and winter. I previously provided comments on the draft backcountry EIS for Denali on 22 May 2003.

I applaud your strategy to define Alternatives 1-5 as sets of desired future conditions for backcountry management areas in the Old Park and the ANILCA expansions of the park and preserve. It may seem desirable to define indicators or “performance standards” by which to measure progress toward future conditions or the degree of resource degradation under specific regulations. However, the process of managing by performance standards, whether in industry or natural resources, essentially works by trial and error in the beginning. Error in the form of allowing structures in wilderness-quality lands or allowing physical damage to surface resources (e.g., trail erosion from overuse, snowmachine damage to alpine vegetation when snow cover is inadequate) greatly compromise wilderness character because they respectively require removal or time for recovery. If the goal of the NPS is to maintain a defacto wilderness character on the 2.25 million acres of lands proposed for Wilderness designation in 1988 (as stated on pp. 26-27), you should consider a more conservative “prescriptive standard” that provides the greatest margin of error in not degrading physical (ultimately aesthetic) conditions on NPS lands. Alternative 2 provides the closest match to such a prescriptive standard.

Another caution is that allowing greater access with a promise to evaluate performance standards will require more funding for administration and evaluation of effects of visitation, particularly when it allows motor vehicles (as compared to foot traffic) that could potentially damage vegetation, cause erosion, create noise, or disturb wildlife. The current administrations in state and federal government are pushing strongly for privatization of public services and user fees. Under this model, user fees will need to be assessed from motorized users to meet the increased need for backcountry rangers to monitor effects of motorized uses on the physical and biological environment and soundscape. The most fiscally conservative choice with respect to field staff needs and maintaining the greatest future options for wilderness designation and wildlife conservation is Alternative 2.

Regarding motorized access to ANILCA park and preserve lands for “traditional activities,” I don’t see how NPS can allow snowmachines for non-subsistence uses without heavy law enforcement to prevent abuse to living resources. The primary

Response to Comments

alternative specifies goals for various areas of the park, and sorts out which areas are managed for particular visitor opportunities. However, it leaves flexibility for the National Park Service to decide what tools to use for implementation. Addressing aircraft routing could only be accomplished by establishing voluntary agreements with aircraft operators or through collaboration with the Federal Aviation Administration.

Morgan-5

The National Park Service agrees that much progress can be made through communication on this issue. The Aircraft Overflights Working Group included in the modified preferred alternative would provide a forum for this type of interchange to occur.

Paragi-1

The modified preferred alternative specifically indicates that the National Park Service can take action prior to resource damage occurring. It is incumbent upon the National Park Service to act conservatively to prevent irreversible errors.

Comments

establishing intent of the Old Park (p. 7 and p. 9) was as a “game refuge” in which compatible public uses were allowed. Viewing of wildlife and scenery would be the excuse used by people fully intending to race around highmarking. Snowmachines driven by irresponsible people have great potential for damaging vegetation, particularly in windblown areas, and disturbing big game to the point of fleeing (personal observations of highmarking further east in Alaska Range; illegal by Alaska Statutes if intentional). Denali Highway, Denali State Park, and the Stampede Trail provide huge areas of road-system public lands open for snowmachine access that offer views of Denali or other scenic vistas in the Old Park on clear days. A person has far greater wildlife viewing opportunities and much lesser chance of disturbing animals if they leave a snowmachine and continue on quietly by snowshoes or skis.

2

Setting comparative performance standards can become a slippery slope when decision makers lose perspective. Comparative standards tend to be relaxed over time as conditions deteriorate elsewhere (“still relatively good here...”) because of increasing population density, environmental contamination, decline of a land ethic, and other reasons. Alaskan national parks are the closest proxy to ecological and aesthetic benchmarks that we have in the United States. The most knowledgeable people on historic conditions in Denali are people who have lived or worked in the area (such as retired wildlife researchers, climbing guides, etc., p. 178)--they are often better suited than transient agency staff to know what is at risk of being lost. Setting absolute standards on degradation of the land, living resources, or soundscape by simply saying “no” to continued or expanded uses is an option that needs to be considered (tool number 9, p. 51) for backcountry with wilderness priority (e.g., Management Areas E and OP2).

3

In defining boat access, NPS needs to clarify its policy on airboats, which to my knowledge are not classified as watercraft by the State of Alaska. Shallow braided rivers that challenge access even by jetboats can be readily traveled by airboats because of their low draft and ability to travel overland in some terrain. The noise of airboats is highly disturbing to wildlife and many people and is not what I consider “reasonable access” to NPS lands because it disturbs virtually all other uses.

4

Allocation of backcountry uses is an economic consideration for local communities in the RDEIS (p. 28). A recent study on the Gallatin National Forest in Montana demonstrated that non-motorized uses had a greater economic benefit to local communities than motorized uses (McMillion 2005, cited below). Visitor demographics and spending statistics for both summer and winter would be required to make this type of comparison in the Denali region.

Finally, I concur with the State of Alaska comments that a 24-hour advance registration system be considered for backcountry camping permits (p. 480, first paragraph). Reservations could be released to someone else on standby if the person who registered in advance does not appear at the NPS registration facility by an appointed time. Advanced registration could be done by phone during business hours or by internet anytime, as Alaska State Parks and BLM currently do for backcountry cabin registrations.

Response to Comments

Paragi-2

The modified preferred alternative is not intended to allow incompatible forms of recreational activity to occur in Denali, including high-marking, racing, or any operation of equipment that harasses wildlife or damages vegetation. One of the management tools identified by the modified preferred alternative is “enforcement of existing regulations,” which would resolve the issues mentioned. Enforcement of snowmachine speed limits would effectively prevent high-marking or racing activity. There are also existing rules that prohibit vegetation damage and harassing wildlife. The modified preferred alternative calls for increases in patrol rangers to better enforce these existing regulations.

Paragi-3

By providing objective measures of resource and social conditions, the modified preferred alternative should provide insulation against slipping standards. Although provision is made to adjust indicators and standards based on new information gained during the early period of monitoring, ultimately visitor use should be adjusted, not the standards, in order to insure protection of park resources.

Paragi-4

Motorboats are generally allowed in Alaska national parks by 43 CFR 36.11(d). However, while the National Park Service has not issued a nationwide rule, regulations have tended to treat airboats as something other than a “motorboat.” Regulations for Big Cypress National Preserve at 36 CFR 7.86(a) define airboats as motorized vehicles along with swamp vehicles, air cushion vehicles, automobiles, and trucks, distinguished from motorboats that are driven by a propeller in water. Regulations for the Alaska National Wildlife Refuges at 50 CFR 36.2 define airboats as off-road vehicles, not as motorboats.

Comments

Tom Paragi
1271 Lowbush Lane
Fairbanks, AK 99709-6039

McMillion, Scott. 20 June 2005. Proposed restrictions on motorized use on the Gallatin wouldn't have much impact, study shows. Bozeman Daily Chronicle, Bozeman, Montana. (<http://bozemandailychronicle.com/articles/2005/06/20/news/01impact.txt>)

Response to Comments

Comments

P.O. Box 766
Talkeetna, AK 99676
June 24, 2005

Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Via e-mail: DENA_BC_Plan_Comment@nps.gov

Via fax: 907-683-9612

Re: Denali Draft Backcountry Management Plan Comments

Superintendent:

I have lived and recreated in the northern Susitna Valley for many years and am quite familiar with the south side of the National Park and Preserve ("Park") and adjoining lands.

I support Alternative 2, which I believe is the only alternative that adequately protects Park resources and wilderness values.

I am troubled, first of all, that your preferred alternative this time around is "4." Despite 93% of the comments on your previous draft urging adoption of Alternative B, your preferred Alternative 4 is at the same place on the protection of wilderness values versus development/access spectrum as your previous Alternative D. The question that jumps out in my mind is whether you are being responsive to the wishes of the public when you "prefer" Alternative 4.

An example of how Alternative 4 is inappropriate is Management Area A on the south side between and on either side of the Ruth and Tokositna glaciers. The minimally acceptable resource or social conditions that this draft prefers under Alternative 4 are higher than I would deem appropriate. My understanding (per NPS statement at public meeting) is that Management Area A was chosen for this area to accommodate demand 20 years hence. If meeting future demand, which is uncertain and speculative, is the driver of the Management Area designations, then you have a formula for continued and progressive deterioration of Park wilderness values and resources. Since demand over the long term is unlimited, a policy to meet demand means that Park resources cannot avoid being indefinitely whittled away. Management decisions should be driven, first and foremost, by the protection of Park wilderness resources and values.

I don't think that the system you have devised for monitoring resource damage and enforcing restrictions will function effectively in practice. First, it appears that regulatory action will only be taken after resource damage occurs. That means that the damage is done, and all you can do, at best, is prevent further damage. It is important to develop a mechanism, in this Plan, for protecting the resource before the damage occurs.

I also question the practical feasibility of NPS monitoring and enforcement: to properly assess impacts and damage to Park resources and carry out enforcement actions to restrict or modify use in the impacted areas. NPS is facing seemingly unending budget

Response to Comments

Strassenburgh-1

The National Park Service agrees that the protection of park resources and values, including wilderness resource values, is of primary concern. The Overview of the modified preferred alternative was clarified to demonstrate that the National Park Service seeks to provide a variety of appropriate recreational opportunities in the park and preserve, but not necessarily to accommodate all possible future demand. However, the National Park Service does expect that the management area designations would allow for some growth in all categories of backcountry visitation.

Strassenburgh-2

See NPCA-1.

Strassenburgh-3

See PFP-4 and DCC-30.

Comments

reductions, and I don't see how the staff and funds will be available to do the job. In addition, my experience has been that the more an activity or use becomes entrenched, the more difficult it is to restrict. It appears to me, particularly with regard to snowmachine use, that the flood gates are being opened, and I don't see how they can be closed.

With regard to corridors depicted on Maps 2-10 and 2-11, I urge you to remove the corridor on the upper Tokositna River that extends from Park boundary to the Kanikula Glacier. I have traveled to the foot of the Kanikula Glacier by dogteam. The stretch of the Tokositna River upstream from the foot of the Tokositna Glacier is a very special area in terms of wildlife and wilderness values. There is a place near the foot of the Tokositna Glacier where the Tokositna River crosses the valley and provides a natural barrier. Many snowmachines turn around there. To get beyond that point usually requires crossing open water (a small riffle). This would be a logical place to prohibit snowmachines from traveling further up towards the Kanikula Glacier. In the past, if one persevered upstream past the riffle, one was rewarded by an abundance of wildlife sign and a sense of wilderness. Unfortunately, an increasing number of snowmachines are traveling to the upper reaches of the valley. As a consequence, I am unable to experience the Park's wildlife and wilderness. I do not go to the Kanikula Glacier to be offered a beer (which happened once), but to marvel at the grandeur of one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. The Tokositna valley upstream from Bunco Lake, not so many years ago, had that sense of wilderness. Now the snowmachines have overrun the place. I think it is important to the wildlife and to those who value quiet recreation be allowed a pristine experience with reasonable access from the south side. Choosing Alternative 2 or modifying one of the other Alternatives to prohibit snowmachines in this corridor would accomplish this.

4

The letter EPA wrote in comment to your previous draft did an excellent job of detailing the adverse impacts that snowmachines have on vegetation, wildlife, water/wetlands, and the natural soundscape. The letter states that snowmachine use "has the greatest potential to cause significant environmental impacts," and "snowmobile use is likely to grow rapidly at Denali National Park." This, coupled with the adverse impacts that snowmachines have on non-motorized users (e.g., noise, smelly exhaust, tracked up snowscape, trails ruined by paddle tracks), makes a compelling case for prohibiting snowmachine use, and I urge you to do just that in the entire Park and Preserve. I realize that this is a thorny issue and I have read your response to EPA concerns (page 435), but nonetheless I believe that you have to do considerably more than Alternative 4 to protect Park resources from snowmachine use.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

John Strassenburgh

Response to Comments

Strassenburgh-4

The preferred alternative was modified to end the winter season Corridor on the Kanikula at the mouth of Wildhorse Creek. However, snowmachine access for traditional activities could occur beyond that point. Standards for Management Area A would apply in the area upstream and around the Corridor.

Comments

1/6/05
COMMENT TO BACKCOUNTRY PLAN

1
No matter what plan ultimately comes to pass it will be woefully inadequate if it does not address the invasive loud air traffic noise over the West Buttress Route. One pass through flights in transit don't invade our minds the way circulate grinding climber spotting flightseeing does. Most transit flights cross the range low (11 to 12000 ft) and don't produce the stress of the high altitude touring flights do. The pitch changes at altitude making the noise more unbearable. We are the object of the viewing and therefore the focus of the most intense ear splitting prop blast. This is all taking place in the wilderness... what wilderness? Loud obnoxious mechanical noise is incompatible with the very experience we want to preserve.

Response to Comments

Tejas-1

The upper elevations of Mount McKinley are within the West Buttress Special Use Area and OP-1 management areas in the modified preferred alternative, which is appropriate since this part of the mountain is also within the congressionally designated Denali Wilderness. Both of these management area designations allow only a "low" level of natural sound disturbance. Because Mount McKinley is a focus of visitor activity, an important park resource, and in designated wilderness, the National Park Service anticipates that addressing user conflicts and resource issues related to aircraft use around the mountain to be one of the most daunting tasks in implementing the BCMP, particularly since the National Park Service has no regulatory authority over airspace. However, the modified preferred alternative does provide clear guidance as to desired future conditions on Mount McKinley and provides tools sufficient to achieve those conditions. Some of these tools, i.e., involving the regulatory authority of other agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration, would have more barriers to implementation than actions the National Park Service could take on its own.

Comments

~~THE~~ DENALI IS A BIG MOUNTAIN WITH AN EAST SIDE AND A NORTH SIDE THAT HAVE VERY LITTLE CLIMBING ACTIVITY. LET'S RELIEVE THE GROUND USERS OF THE PARK FROM THE TYRANNY OF THE PLANES. THIS AIR SPACE NEEDS TO BE CONTROLLED BEFORE THE SITUATION BECOMES UNBEARABLE AND THE QUALITY OF OUR WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE IS TOTALLY RUINED.

THERE IS ONE OUTFIT THAT EMPLOYS TWIN ENGINE AIRCRAFT THAT DIVE BOMB THE UPPER MOUNTAIN ON A CLEAR DAY. THEY START EARLY (7:45AM) AND GO ALL DAY LONG (AK SUMMER DAY) SOMETIMES 2 OR 3 OVERHEAD AT ONCE. THIS IS A POOR EXPERIENCE. WE CAN DO BETTER. WE NEED TO MEASURE THE DB IMPACT AT 17,200FT. WE NEED TO HAVE AIRCRAFT CONVERTED TO ACCEPTABLE NOISE LEVELS. PLEASE HELP! VERN TEJAS

Response to Comments

Comments

Comments for: Denali National Park and Preserve Backcountry Management Plan

Denali National Park and Preserve Mission Statement:

The National Park Service is dedicated to conserving unimpaired the natural and cultural resources, as well the aesthetic and wilderness values of Denali National Park and Preserve, for the benefit, use, education and inspiration of present and future generations. The Service is also responsible for sustaining a subsistence and frontier lifestyle, and setting a conducive to scientific investigation provided they can be accommodated within the constraints of the mission at large".

The Backcountry Management Plan (BCMP) must take into account the Mission statement listed above, first and foremost, "... CONSERVING UNIMPAIRED the natural and cultural resources..." and "sustaining a subsistence and frontier lifestyle, and setting conducive to scientific investigation PROVIDED they can be accommodated WITHIN the constraints of the mission at large. Meaning that access, use, education, subsistence, frontier lifestyle and research needs to be within the constraints of, "conserving unimpaired", and "aesthetic and wilderness values". The current management and the proposed management plan do not fall within these constraints.

The BENEFIT of this park is that it has the opportunity to provide visitors with a wilderness experience free, or mostly free, from human and modern impacts. But to accomplish this opportunity the Park Service has to reverse many of the current trends and impacts.

Many people who come to visit Denali do not know what a wilderness experience truly entails. It is, and should be, far different from the comfort zone provided by most of their modern conveniences. Too many of the current trends appear to be all about modern technologies, luxuries, conveniences, visitor comfort and of course the mighty dollar and not about the quality of the wilderness experience. Each expansion, building, technology, modern amenity is taking away from the quality of the Wilderness and Frontier experience. The wilderness is not about luxuries, conveniences and the mighty dollar.

For visitors not experienced in the outdoors, wilderness or sub arctic, there should be a certain amount of unease, apprehensions, discomfort or even hardship. It should take some planning and effort to visit the wilderness and they should be provided with a full range of wilderness and frontier experiences without modern intrusions. The experience should not be handed to the visitor on a platter or be "canned". The park seems to be going in the direction of that "canned" experience. Don't get your feet wet, don't get off the bus and explore, don't smell the flowers or feel the tundra, just sit back in your seat on a loud diesel bus with dirty windows and let the wilderness pass you by, have everything "fed" to you in a program with as many people as can be crammed into one vehicle and with as many vehicles as can be jammed together on one road. The wilderness experience should offer some sense of solitude, remoteness, unease, awe, risk, quiet, tension, beauty, calm, basic, inspirational and not modern, fast paced, technological, intrusive, or overused.

There must be a balance between the wilderness experience, personal comfort, and modern technologies. This has lost some of that wilderness experience and is continually losing more in each incremental change. Incremental changes end up being large major changes when all are added together in the end. There is too much noise, too many people, too much evidence that people have been here before, too many vehicles on the road, too many environmental ethics broken, not enough visitor education, too much building, not enough park service employees, too many disturbances on the wildlife and other resources.

I recommend that you use alternative #2 or the DCC recommendation for the new Backcountry Management Plan (BCMP). Preferred alternative #4 allows too many disturbances, too high of encounter rates, and too high levels of sound disturbances. All of these things are not compatible with Wilderness and the experiences that should be expected and not expected in the wilderness.

The Park and Preserve sections that do not have an official designation should be managed as Wilderness as the default designation requires. The BCMP alternative #4 is not compatible with that designation and therefore should not be chosen.

Old Park 1 in Preferred Alternative #4 should have more area designated as Old Park 2, sensitive areas of Toklat Basin and Upper reaches of the Alaska Range, where standards will result in fewer adverse impacts to the parks resources. Old Park 1 standards are too high of encounter rates and human disturbances for the Wilderness Core of the Park.

Kantishna is a unique issue with a connected but separate future and a separate DCP is recommended where these issues can be addressed. Again, the preferred alternative #4 allows for levels of noise and visitor encounter that are too high.

Management area A (Dunkle Hills) should be eliminated and replaced with Management area B. This area has sensitive caribou habitat, conflicts with subsistence users may occur and management 'A' conflicts with Wilderness values by allowing high levels of human encounters and high levels or sound disturbances.

Supintendent's Office
JUL 13 2005
Denali National Park and Preserve

Response to Comments

Turnbull-1

See DCC-36.

Turnbull-2

See DCC-5 and DCC-22.

1

2

Comments

Management area A (Climbing Zone) is an unnecessarily large area and should be decreased in size to the size of the "special use area" and the special use area on alternative #4 should also be decreased in size to about 1/6th. Alternative #4 allows for too much scenic landing and too high of levels of sound disturbances.

'ap 2-10 and Map 2-11: All corridors and portals should be removed.

Recreational snow machines are not compatible with wilderness usage. And traditional subsistence use of snow machines needs to be defined and enforced. Snow machines increase the sound levels and impair on wilderness experience. They are not compatible with non motorized users such as dog sledding, cross country skiing and snow shoeing. Snow machines impair park resources and cause negative impacts on wilderness, flora and fauna and the visitor experience. Recreational snow machining is available on the majority of non-National Park lands in Alaska. Do not allow recreational snow machining to gain a foothold in Denali National Park and Preserve. In the future, it may be the only place to travel undisturbed by loud mechanical vehicles. This also includes helicopters. They are not compatible at all with Wilderness and shouldn't be allowed to start landing in the park.

Budget: The current budget for the park continues to be cut. There is currently not enough in the budget to hire enough law enforcement and interpretive rangers as well as other staff. Alternative #4 has a large budget. Where are you going to get the funds? There is not enough money now to provide the quality services necessary. Is there money for adequate enforcement in the preferred alternative? Will enforcement of the standards only occur after impairment? We already know that the environment in this park is very fragile and that once impaired it will take years to recover. Prevention of such impairment is expected as preservation is in the core of mission statement.

Guided Hiking: All guided hiking within the park should be conducted by the park service and not pawned out to the concessionaire or any other private entity. Visitors to this park have very little contact opportunities with Park Service personnel if any at all and Park Service will have more control over the quality of the experience for the visitor than will any private entity. Our National Parks are becoming privatized to an alarming rate and then the focus becomes how much money can we make, how little can we pay our employees, and how hard can we work them, and not the quality of the experience. The Park Service uniform still stands for something much more than any private uniform – quality, knowledge, authority, and protection – that uniform is still looked up to but it is losing its presence in Denali.

Discovery Hikes: Discovery hikes are very important and a great educational and experiential opportunity for visitors and should remain a Park Service run program. The disco hikes should remain at 30 participants in total for any given day, but the groups should be smaller to allow for a high quality experience and provide for low impact. There should be 10 people per hike, 3 hikes per day divided into three main sections of the park. One hike between the entrance to Sanctuary, one between Sanctuary to Polychrome, and polychrome to Eielson, or something of that approximately. This would allow of one hike of each level each day. It would allow for a longer guided hike for those with less time available or who would like to do a hike on a second day visit without going so far into the park. The Front Country Hike could use some of the longer trails like Triple Lakes and Savage and also do some trail less hiking. The Toklat trek, to my knowledge, does not have high participation and maybe should be cancelled and allow that Ranger to lead another Disco Hike.

Denali National Park and Preserve is a unique and special place. It is the most visited Sub-Arctic National Park in the world. It should be managed as a wilderness park with non-motorized opportunities for wilderness experiences that are markedly different from those on surrounding public lands. Protection of natural ecological processes and wildlife should be the number one priority for the BCMP. People be able to expect to not have a high level of human encounters within the wilderness setting of Denali and not to have "combat wildlife sighting" such as at Tek Rest stop on July 10, 2005. Visitors where struggling to get a look at a bear walking down the gravel bar, there were so many people along the railing that they were 4 and 5 deep trying to get a look over the top of each other. There were 6 tour buses, 2 Kantishna buses and 2 VTS buses, there were possibly more than 500 people fighting to see that bear. That does not constitute a wilderness experience.

Overall vehicle traffic should be decreased but at a minimum bus spacing can be worked out better to avoid such concentration. VTS has it's concentration in the Mornings to allow hikers time to get off and hike and still catch another bus. TWT tours therefore should have their concentration in the afternoons when VTS has less buses on the road. This would even out the distribution of traffic and provide less human encounters for the morning passengers of Tour and VTS providing an increased quality in the experience. Allowing 20 morning TWT tours creates a poor wilderness experience for all the visitors at that time of day whether they are on a Tour bus, Kantishna bus or VTS bus. It degrades the experience for everybody. Also, decreasing VTS buses and increasing Tour buses is doing a disservice for the general public. The National Parks are for the general public, VTS is the public bus system and Tour is marketed for the high end traveler and not affordable to the average person on a family vacation and decreases the access to the park by the general public if the tour bus percentage is allowed to become higher than the VTS system.

ipulate in the plan that you will apply the Old Park definition of traditional activities to the remaining park and preserve. :recreational snow machining is not a traditional activity under ANILCA's special access provisions.

Response to Comments

Turnbull-3

See DCC-4.

Turnbull-4

See DCC-30.

Turnbull-5

The National Park Service recognizes the high value of ranger-led hikes, including Discovery Hikes, and intends for them to continue. Consideration would be given to the concept of offering three Discovery Hikes per day during plan implementation. The modified preferred alternative prioritizes available capacity for organized educational programs or commercial group hiking in the backcountry to be utilized for NPS programs and programs of the Murie Science and Learning Center. However, it is not realistic for the National Park Service to meet all types of demand for guided backcountry activities. Some visitors seek a higher level of expertise or more in-depth learning experiences than can be provided by the NPS seasonal interpretive program. The National Park Service cannot easily accommodate logistically complicated multi-day programs. In terms of implementation priorities for the modified preferred alternative, additional seasonal interpretive staff is difficult to justify compared to monitoring and enforcement staff, given that other entities are able to deliver educational programs.

Turnbull-6

The National Park Service agrees that Discovery Hikes are important. However, this plan provides only general guidance on the type of interpretive programming that is needed and appropriate for the backcountry. The issues raised in this comment would be addressed through future interpretive planning and annual program decisions.

Turnbull-7

Issues related to park road and bus system management were addressed in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan* and are outside the scope of this BCMP.

Comments

The plan should stipulate that NPS will finalize the Wilderness recommendation and designation process. The BCMP should not set indicators and standards at levels that will degrade areas suitable for Wilderness designation and should manage the Park and Preserve sections as Wilderness by default until this process is complete.

Continue the policy of no formal trails in the backcountry. Trails should only be constructed to avoid impairment. All trails should undergo NEPA public process. Prevention of social trails should be of high importance even if that means closing an area to day and/or overnight use until re-vegetation occurs. Rotational closing of backcountry units from year to year to decrease impairment in areas showing impact. Reversing the conditions that have already occurred back to a pristine state. Working agreements and control of guided groups and independents from Kantishna. Education and enforcement of Leave No Trace ethics especially with groups, be it Kantishna or Shuttle bus riders. In Leave No Trace Outdoor Skills and Ethics – Alaska Tundra by National Outdoor Leadership School, a book commonly found within the Park's bookstores, it states that "Remote or 'pristine' areas typically show little sign of human use". However, Denali although remote is far from "Pristine"

Denali is overused in certain areas and continues to show signs of wear and tear from human use through out the park. The booklet also states to "Travel in small groups, a group of 4-6 people strikes a balance between bear safety and environmental concerns, and if possible, during seasons or days of the week when use levels are low. The less often people use a remote campsite, (or trail), the better chance it has of retaining its pristine qualities. Most campsites, (and trails), can recover completely from a limited amount of use. However, a threshold is eventually reached where the regenerative power of the vegetation cannot keep pace with the amount of trampling and continued use will cause the site to deteriorate rapidly. Allow time for recovery. If they receive no further use, campsites and trails can revert back to their natural state. Even in Alaska the quantity of pristine lands, whether in 100 acre or 100 square mile parcels, is growing smaller everyday. Consequently it is essential that we challenge ourselves and others to preserve these remaining wild places".

Be proactive in the protection of natural soundscape, a key wilderness resource. The BCMP should identify those areas of the park where current noise levels exceed standards and provide specific mitigations for these problems. To protect the soundscape, it is important that the NPS limit scenic tour landings and work with aircraft operations to protect Denali's natural sounds from the incessant noise of over flights. Also limit the flyovers in the off season by researchers, especially low flyovers that do impact the wildlife. Those wolves are no different than we are. I can work in a noisy environment and still accomplish my goals, but I will work much better without intrusions and excessive noise and so will those wolves. No researcher can convince me that the planes do not bother them, we all know better than that.

The BCMP should change the preferred alternative #4, which will result in increased impairment to the park resources. Specifically, levels of use and the impacts associated with Management areas designated as 'A', Corridors and Portals are incompatible with wilderness suitability. Select an alternative that retains the spirit of Alternative 2, which does the most to protect park resources as outlined in your mission statement.

Strengthen the monitoring and enforcement elements of the plan. Data analysis should be conducted more frequently than every five years. Without frequent monitoring, the park cannot be proactive in protecting park resources. The BCMP must stipulate what the Park Service will do if there is inadequate funding for monitoring and enforcement.

The road corridor which currently is not designated backcountry should be managed more conservatively than the current front country designation. This area defaults to backcountry designation in the winter therefore people expect a backcountry experience 8-9 months out of the year. If the road corridor continues front country management it will impair the backcountry experience for both winter and summer visitors. For this road corridor is the primary access for all summer visitors. This is where most people get their backcountry experience from. There should be less tolerance of noise, human encounters, impact, vehicles, and even structures than there is currently. Reverse the current trends along the road corridor to improve on the current wilderness experience.

Restrictions and enforcement of the items that will reverse the impacts already made and continue the preservation of the wilderness and wildlife should take precedence. I often hear, from Park Service, things such as: "We can't tell them this" or "We can't make them do that" but that is just not so. Katmai National Park requires all of their visitors to go directly to Bear Etiquette before they can do anything else. They are not allowed to carry food with them in camp and are not allowed to 'eat out with the bears'. McNeil River has a permit system, "The permit program was developed after many years of excessive and uncontrolled public use of the area that often put people and bears in danger. The goal of the permit program is to provide the public with an opportunity to view and photograph bears while minimizing their impacts to bears and wildlife habitats. No one has ever been injured by a bear at McNeil River and since the permit program was initiated, no bears have been killed by visitors who felt threatened. To maintain this record, visitor activities at the sanctuary are closely managed and evaluated". Denali is heading directly in the path of a new release headline that may read something like: "First Human Death by Grizzly Bear in Denali's Entire History", if things do not begin to change. The park does not need to tempt fate by having picnic table areas accessible to bears or even allowing eating in the rest stops at all, or by not insisting at every visitor go through bear etiquette and leave no trace etiquette, especially those that drive the road without an employee to rect their behavior. NPS must insist that all drivers in the park hold up the low impact standards set forth by the Keep the Wildlife Wild campaign. Every visitor should know and understand the Leave No Trace ethics.

Response to Comments

Turnbull-8

See P&P-6.

Turnbull-9

The no-formal-trails policy would be continued throughout the backcountry in the modified preferred alternative. Only a few specific trails would be constructed where vegetation damage is already occurring, including a formalized trail system in the Kantishna Hills. In other areas, the NPS would manage visitor use rather than constructing additional trails to mitigate damage from overuse. The primary tool to address areas that are overused for hiking and camping would be a working group composed of those entities that lead groups into the backcountry or provide access to individuals, as identified under the subsection Cross Country Travel in the Access section. This group would work with the National Park Service to coordinate responses to resource damage using the Decision Guide for Addressing Social Trail Formation (Table 2-12). Closures or additional limits on use are potential tools for addressing trampling damage, as described in this table.

Turnbull-10

Table 4-1 in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences provides a comparison of noise conditions to standards in places where measurements have been conducted. The modified preferred alternative establishes that research flights would be subject to a number of tests to insure that they are the least disruptive possible. All NPS research flights in the backcountry would be subject to the minimum requirement/ minimum tool processes. All research would require a research permit, and the proposed activities must be consistent with the management area standards of the area where the research would occur. These standards now include elements for wildlife population, demographics, and distribution.

Turnbull-11

See NPCA-5 and DCC-30.

Comments

Although access is a part of the mission statement, preservation and protection take top priority, for if you do not maintain the preservation, the true wilderness and the reason for this place will no longer remain and you will have failed in your mission. The process to failure has already begun. The National Park Service has an obligation to the people to set the standards to maintain this wilderness even if that means access is secondary so that there is still wilderness and wildlife left to be experienced for the future generations. If that means limiting access, so be it, it will mean that those who are able to visit Denali will have a once in a lifetime experience instead of an overcrowded, noisy, highly impacted, canned, typical tourist experience. Do not give in to the mighty dollar controlled tourist organizations. Denali should remain accessible to the walk-in and the average person. Denali must remain unique, pristine and wild.

Kim Turnbull *Kim Turnbull* 5 years Park Road Driver

References *1065 Cumberland St. Paul, MN 55117*
P.O. Box 943 Denali Park AK 99755

National Outdoor Leadership School. Leave No Trace Outdoor Skills and Ethics – Alaska Tundra

National Park Service <http://www.nps.gov/legacy/mission.html> *UTS Sharon Parker Sharon Parker 1 yr phdncs*

McNeil River <http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/mcneil/mr-what-is.cfm>

Nicholas Weaver *Nicholas Weaver* 1 year Park Rd driver

Mary Ruzarsky *Mary Ruzarsky* 5 years Park Rd Driver

Barr Gray *Barr Gray* 6 years park road driver

Susan Adams *Susan Adams* 2 years Interpretation

Mike Dyas *Mike Dyas* 15 yrs Driver UTS

Rob Tourtelot *Rob Tourtelot* turtleisle.com 24 yrs Tour driver

Joe Frank *Joe Frank* 2 yr driver
Marco Seeg 5 yr country driver

Scott Johnson *Scott Johnson* 13 years park road driver

Marsha Anderson *Marsha Anderson* 13 yr park road driver

Thomas (Buster) McNeil *Thomas McNeil* 18 years Alaskan home steader

Christina Valvo Hellner *Christina Valvo Hellner* 6 years bus mechanic/land owner

Wade Hellner *Wade Hellner* visitor 7/14/05

Scott Hinkel *Scott Hinkel* visitor 7/14/05

Leely Kinney *Leely Kinney* visitor 7/14/05

Barbara Minit *Barbara Minit* visitor 7/14/05

Carah Minit *Carah Minit* visitor 7/14/05

Engen Korp - *Engen Korp* visitor 7-14-05

Erinne Parks *Erinne Parks* visitor 7/14/05

Walter Rucklsh *Walter Rucklsh* 7/18/05

Sue Kinney *Sue Kinney* visitor 7/18/05

Ellen Stevens *Ellen Stevens* visitor 7/18/05

Response to Comments

Turnbull-12

During the summer months, the park road corridor (150 feet each side and associated material sites and development areas such as the campgrounds and Toklat Road Camp) is outside the scope of the BCMP and is governed under the provisions of the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP*. The National Park Service acknowledges that activities within the road corridor do have an impact on the adjacent backcountry. The Adaptive Management section of the modified preferred alternative indicates that monitoring would be done for the “general conditions of the area, not the exceptions.” This caveat exists to recognize that there are boundary effects that are unavoidable wherever a high use area is adjacent to a low use area, as, for example, the noise and encounters with other visitors near the park road. However, the National Park Service is committed to reducing these boundary effects, for example, by continuing to investigate quieter technology for buses operating on the park road and developing road character guidelines to maintain the rustic character of the road. It is hoped that these types of impacts would diminish over time.

Comments

June 23, 2005

To Whom It May Concern:

I have recently returned from an 8-day trip through the backcountry of Denali National Park (areas 12, 13, and 18, climbing Scott, Sunset, and Eielson peaks). The Denali NP backcountry is kept undeveloped and subject to extremely low camping-permit quotas in order to preserve it as true wilderness. Unfortunately, a crucial link in the chain of protection is missing - the protection against aircraft noise.

On a regular day, we would be woken up before 8 AM by aircraft overhead. "Great, it must be a clear day today, I hear airplanes!" is hardly a quote of a wilderness camper. After 8AM, on clear days, very noisy airplanes and helicopters flew overhead at least once an hour, all heading up the spine of the Alaskan Range towards Denali and back. Thus, on this "wilderness" trip, we have seen more airplanes than large mammals for which the park is famous. Only mosquitoes outnumbered planes on our ticklist of wildlife sightings.

The straw that broke my patience's back was an aerial attack straight out of a World War I movie: we were hiking down upper reaches of Thorofare River when a rickety plane dropped out of the sky and dove towards us, veering off at the last minute and repeating the routine several times. The plane was maybe 200 yards off the ground, less than a mile from us. Sure enough, it was chasing some poor grizzly bear for the pleasure of its clients. A truly shocking experience for someone who spent a sleepless night on the steps of the backcountry office trying to be first in line for the coveted backcountry permit...

My suggestion for solving this obvious problem is two-tiered, starting with the best suggestion, and following up with an acceptable compromise. Suggestion 1) Ban airplanes in National Park airspace. Canada does that, so why can't the US? Are our parks less valuable, or are our parks' animals and visitors somehow less susceptible to noise? This suggestion might end up with a few Alaskans and Arizonians out of a job, but I am sure they could find less protected and still-beautiful areas to fly wealthy visitors over.

This suggestion would also immediately solve the crowding problems on Denali's West Buttress Route. Faced with a 2-month arduous backpacking expedition to reach the summit, many of the current peak-baggers would surely choose to boost their self-esteem elsewhere, perhaps even recalling that North America is not a separate continent, so climbing Aconcagua suffices if you are just after the "highest" summits.

Suggestion 2) My suggestion 1) is clearly not tenable in freedom-loving Alaska, so I will start planning more trips to Canada instead of arguing for it further. One compromise that may be acceptable to most parties using Denali NP would be to limit fly-overs to only airspace within earshot of people who have flown in themselves, and hence cannot argue

Response to Comments

Zeithammer-1

The National Park Service does not have the regulatory authority to ban aircraft over the national park. The National Park Service believes some level of air access is appropriate in the Denali backcountry, and the modified preferred alternative defines that level in terms of indicators and standards.

Zeithammer-2

The management area designations in the modified preferred alternative are consistent with this recommendation. Areas to the south of the Alaska Range would allow the most natural sound disturbance, while areas over the Old Park would allow the least. This allocation was made for several reasons, including the greater need of airplane access for climbers and mountaineers to the glaciers on the south side of the Alaska Range and the greater level of airplane traffic necessary to accommodate that access. However, the management area allocation was also determined by the special management history and legal status of the Denali Wilderness. In general, the National Park Service does not agree that those who enter the park by means of airplane should forfeit all claims to enjoy natural soundscapes while visiting Denali. Visitors who hike into the backcountry from the park road also use motorized vehicles to enter the park, but are not expected to tolerate a diesel bus motor in their campsite. The noise associated with airplane access is sometimes necessary, but should always be the minimum possible for all park visitors.

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2

Comments

against airplanes in principle. In particular, limit fly-overs to only the highest and most inaccessible parts of the park, forcing the planes to come in from the South or West, and only fly only over western sections of units 23 and 22. No more flying along the crest of the range from Cantwell! Under this suggestion, climbers can get into Kahiltna glacier, sightseers can fly from Talkeetna to see the mountain, and all the backcountry users coming in from the Park Road in the North are spared of the constant wilderness-negating noise.

I hope that the National Park Service implements at least my suggestion 2) if not suggestion 1) as part of the new Backcountry Management Plan currently under consideration.

Thank you

Robert Zeithammer
5807 S Woodlawn Ave
Chicago, IL 60637

Response to Comments

Comments

"Keenan Zerkel" [REDACTED]
07/02/2005 08:27 PM PST
To: dena_bc_plan_comment@nps.gov
cc:
Subject: Comments on Denali Park Plan

Dear Denali Park Managers,

I am a lifelong Alaskan resident, very concerned about the future of the Park. I probably enjoy the park than most people. Specifically, I love the raw natural beauty of the area. However, I am also a pilot, and a snowmachine operator. I am concerned because I look at what has happened to access to PUBLIC lands in my state over the past twenty years which can be summarized by a single word...RESTRICTION. I concede that people need a natural, quiet, unspoiled place to hike, reflect, etc. I support maintaining some areas for that purpose. Yet those of us who enjoy snowmachining, flying, hunting, etc should not take a second seat in pursuit of our activities. I have tried to read and understand all the portions of the 5 alternatives (including the 1st "no-action"), but do not have the full picture. (In the future, I think the summary could have been written with more specific deal, but thats a different conversation.) In short, my request to you is that airplane and snowmachine access NOT BE RESTRICTED to the full extent possible.

Aircraft should not be restricted from landing on glaciers. Overflight of the park should not be viewed as spoiling the 'solitude'. Commercial air taxi operators should not be limited to only landing if the guests are spending one night. Snowmachining should continue to be allowed without being restricted to 'traditional' uses. My fear is that in the future, someone will redefine 'traditional use' so that none of us who have grown up with it will be allowed to continue. The current lands available to hunting should be retained. From what I understood in the document, the 4th alternative looks like it best accomodates what I have said above...although not completely. I simply ask you to consider that this is the year 2005 and people no longer treat natural reasources like they did (ignorantly) 50 years ago. These days operators of motorized vehicles, and definitely all sportsmen (hunters, fisherman, etc) treat our vanishing wilderness with respect. As Jay Hammond says, "we are good stewards." There are several examples of parks across the nation

accomodating various interests for everyone. The park should implement a plan for access (via trails, motor vehicles, facilities, whatever) for people with limited access. It is not just for people who like to hike. In the end, we all have to give a little for the best interest of the park. I accept that the rules under which I enjoy the forms of access I use for the park will change, probably more restrictive, better defined and (hopefully) strictly enforced. Please respect our desire as good stewards to enjoy Denali with airplanes and snowmachines in a responsible manner. Thank you for your time, and your efforts to protect this wonderful shared resource. Please let me know if there is any other information I can provide to help aid in your decisions.

Sincerely,
Keenan Zerkel
12515 Rya Rd
Anchorage, Alaska
99516

Response to Comments

Zerkel-1

The National Park Service believes that restrictions are sometimes necessary to protect park resources and manage conflicts between users. However, the modified preferred alternative commits to using the least restrictive measures necessary to achieve the standards set for each management area.

Zerkel-2

With the *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP*, the *South Side Denali DCP*, and the BCMP, the National Park Service has outlined a comprehensive strategy for providing access and visitor services at Denali, including provisions for those visitors who are not necessarily interested in or able to hike or otherwise make cross country expeditions. The National Park Service believes that between these three plans, all visitors interested in gaining access to the park to learn about and experience park resources would have opportunities to do so. In the backcountry, opportunities for visitors of all abilities and interests include short trails, educational and commercial guided activities, and scenic air tour landings.

Appendices

Appendices A, B, and D-H are unchanged from the *Revised Draft EIS* and are incorporated here by reference. Additions and changes to the Bibliography are presented below as an Errata sheet. Appendix C: ANILCA Section 810(a) Summary of Evaluations and Findings is updated to reflect the modifications in the preferred alternative and is provided in its entirety.

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APPENDIX C: ANILCA SECTION 810(A) SUMMARY OF EVALUATIONS AND FINDINGS

I. Introduction

This evaluation and finding was prepared to comply with Title VIII, Section 810 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). It evaluates the potential restrictions to subsistence activities that could result from implementation of the backcountry management plan for Denali National Park and Preserve. The *Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* describes a range of alternatives for consideration.

II. The Evaluation Process

Section 810(a) of ANILCA states:

"In determining whether to withdraw, reserve, lease, or otherwise permit the use, occupancy, or disposition of public lands . . . the head of the Federal agency . . . over such lands . . . shall evaluate the effect of such use, occupancy, or disposition on subsistence uses and needs, the availability of other lands for the purposes sought to be achieved, and other alternatives which would reduce or eliminate the use, occupancy, or disposition of public lands needed for subsistence purposes. No such withdrawal, reservation, lease, permit, or other use, occupancy or disposition of such lands which would significantly restrict subsistence uses shall be effected until the head of such Federal agency:

1. gives notice to the appropriate State agency and the appropriate local committees and regional councils established pursuant to Section 805;
2. gives notice of, and holds, a hearing in the vicinity of the area involved; and
3. determines that (A) such a significant restriction of subsistence uses is necessary, consistent with sound management principles for the utilization of the public lands, (B) the proposed activity would involve the minimal amount of public lands necessary to accomplish the purposes of such use, occupancy, or other disposition, and (C) reasonable steps would be taken to minimize adverse impacts upon subsistence uses and resources resulting from such actions."

ANILCA created new units and additions to existing units of the national park system in Alaska. Denali National Park and Preserve additions were created by ANILCA Section 202(3)(a) for the purposes of:

"The park additions and preserve shall be managed for the following purposes, among others: To protect and interpret the entire mountain massif, and additional scenic mountain peaks and formations; and to protect habitat for, and populations of fish and wildlife, including but not limited to, brown/grizzly bears, moose, caribou, Dall sheep, wolves, swans and other waterfowl; and to provide continued opportunities including

reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities."

Subsistence is an allowed use in the ANILCA additions to Denali National Park and Preserve (Sec. 202(3)(a)). The potential for significant restriction must be evaluated for the proposed action's effect upon " . . . subsistence uses and needs, the availability of other lands for the purposes sought to be achieved and other alternatives which would reduce or eliminate the use." (Sec. 810(a))

III. Proposed Action on Federal Lands

The "Description of Alternatives" section of the *Revised Draft* and the *Final Backcountry Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* describes in detail the alternatives for consideration. Following is a brief summary of each.

Alternative 1: No Action

The National Park Service would continue the present management direction, guided by the 1986 *General Management Plan*, the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan*, the 1997 *South Side Denali Development Concept Plan*, the 1997 *Strategic Plan*, and backcountry management plans from 1976 and 1982.

Recreational use and access patterns would continue to develop, and the agency would respond as necessary on a case-by-case basis. No new services or facilities would be developed to meet increased levels of use in the backcountry, except for those identified in the entrance area or south side plans.

There would be no new management areas defined for the backcountry of Denali National Park and Preserve. The entire backcountry would continue to be defined as a "Natural Area" under the 1986 General Management Plan. The only distinctions between areas of the backcountry would be the legislative distinctions of the designated Wilderness in the former Mount McKinley National Park, the 1980 national park additions, and the national preserves. There would be no resource or social standards defined for any portion of the backcountry.

Alternative 2

This alternative would distinguish a unique Denali experience based on dispersed use in a wilderness landscape with few sights or sounds of people or mechanized civilization.

There would be few services, facilities, or signs of management presence. This alternative would most clearly distinguish the backcountry experience in Denali from the surrounding public lands, providing a place primarily for visitors who are very self-reliant, and including many opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations. Backcountry users seeking other experiences would find those opportunities on neighboring lands.

Alternative 3

This alternative would provide a variety of appropriate wilderness recreational activities by establishing areas to serve those visitors who want to experience the wilderness resource values of the Denali backcountry but require services, assistance, or short time-commitments. The areas would be the minimum necessary to provide these experiences based on present demand and would be focused along the park road, in Kantishna near the park road, and around the Ruth Glacier (along with existing mountaineering activity on the Kahiltina Glacier). The majority of the backcountry would be managed for dispersed, self-reliant travel and would include opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations. Growth in other uses would be accommodated on neighboring lands.

Alternative 4 – Modified (NPS Preferred)

This backcountry management plan would guide the National Park Service in providing opportunities for a variety of wilderness recreational activities and experiences while recognizing and protecting the premier wilderness resource values of the entire backcountry. Areas in the Dunkle Hills and around the Ruth and Tokositna Glaciers on the south side of the Alaska Range would be managed for those visitors who want to experience the wilderness resource values or other resource values of the Denali backcountry but require services or assistance, or who are unable to make a lengthy time commitment. Areas along the park road in the Old Park and the Kantishna Hills would provide accessible opportunities for short- or long-duration wilderness recreational activities with only limited options for guidance or assistance the farther one gets from the park road. The remainder of the backcountry would be managed for dispersed, self-reliant travel, and would include opportunities for extended expeditions in very remote locations.

Alternative 5

This alternative would create two distinct geographic areas that provide different kinds of visitor experiences in the Denali backcountry. The old Mount McKinley National Park and the Denali additions north of the Alaska Range would be primarily managed for dispersed, self-reliant travel although no areas would be managed specifically to preserve opportunities for extended expeditions in remote locations. Areas along the park road and in Kantishna that presently receive a relatively high volume of use and large parts of the additions south of the Alaska Range would be managed for a greater intensity and variety of appropriate recreational activities and would have more visible management presence and opportunities for more services and facilities.

IV. Affected Environment

Introduction

The backcountry of Denali National Park and Preserve includes the entire park except the development sub-zones delineated in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan*. For some topics the backcountry management plan includes

uses even in the development sub-zones, but proposed actions are consistent with the *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan* and the *South Side Denali Development Concept Plan*. The study area includes designated, proposed, potential, recommended, and suitable wilderness, but the plan does not make recommendations for federally-designated Wilderness.

Park Environment

Denali National Park and Preserve is located in the interior of Alaska and is dominated by an east to west line of towering, glaciated mountains known as the Alaska Range. The range rises abruptly from lowlands of 500 to 2,000 feet in elevation to the pinnacle of Mount McKinley, North America's highest mountain, at 20,320 feet. The range is perpetually snowclad above approximately 7,500 feet on the north and 6,000 feet on the south. Glaciers are numerous and tend to be larger and longer on the south side of the range than on the north.

Moisture from the Gulf of Alaska is blocked by the Alaska Range, causing a continental climate to the north of the range and more of a maritime climate to the south. Moisture-laden air from the south results in greater levels of precipitation on the southern flanks of the range. The average annual precipitation at park headquarters is 15 inches, while at some higher elevations in the park the total precipitation exceeds 80 inches and snowfall exceeds 400 inches. Normal snowpack throughout the region averages between 20 and 40 inches.

Vegetative cover in Denali is typical of interior Alaska taiga. Lowland floodplains are dominated by dense, deciduous or coniferous forest, or by a mixed forest of balsam poplar and white spruce. Upland forests tend to be more open with mixed or continuous stands of black spruce, white spruce, or aspen. Upland forests give way to shrub communities at elevations above approximately 2,400 feet. Glacial rivers flowing from the Alaska Range create broad floodplains that are sparsely vegetated. Tall shrub communities of willow and alder grow on moist slopes and along drainages, and low shrub communities of dwarf birch and willow grow at higher elevations or on dry slopes. Alpine tundra, composed of dryas and dwarf willow shrub, mat and cushion species, or grass and sedge mixes, grows on slopes and ridges to about 6,000 feet. More than 650 species of flowering plants inhabit the slopes and valleys of the park.

The original Mount McKinley National Park was established in 1917 primarily as a refuge for large mammals. In 1980, ANILCA enlarged the Old Park to more than 6 million acres and re-designated the area as Denali National Park and Preserve. The protected subarctic ecosystem of Denali provides habitat for 30 species of mammals, at least 152 species of breeding birds, 16 species of fish (twelve resident species and four anadromous Pacific salmon species), and 1 amphibian. The American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*), the subspecies that nests in the Denali region, was formerly listed as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act but was delisted as of August 25, 1999 (64 FR 46542). No federally designated threatened or endangered species are known to occur within Denali National Park and Preserve (see appendix E of the original draft plan, consultation letter from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NPS 2003d).

About 100 archeological sites are recorded within Denali National Park and Preserve. Archeological investigations conducted within and immediately adjacent to the park strongly suggest that sites dating from the Paleoarctic tradition (10,000 years before present) through the Protohistoric period (200 years before present) exist within the park. Excavations at the Dry Creek site, situated near the northeastern boundary of the park, have yielded one of Alaska's earliest dates, 11,000 years before present (BP). The Carlo Creek site, situated along the Nenana River on the eastern boundary of the park, is dated at approximately 8,000 BP. These sites may depict tool technologies and subsistence patterns representing the earliest peopling of North America by means of the Bering Land Bridge.

The Denali area was used historically by several Athabaskan Indian groups. The Ahtna people of Cantwell arrived from the east, the Tanana people came into the area from the north traveling up the Nenana and Toklat Rivers, and the Koyukon people who lived at Lake Minchumina ascended the McKinley, Foraker, and Herron Rivers. The Upper Kuskokwim people who still live in Nikolai and Telida approached the park from the west, and the Dena'ina people approached the park from the south. Subsistence activities included large mammal hunting, fishing, and small game trapping.

A more comprehensive description of existing conditions can be found in the affected environment section of the *Revised Draft Backcountry Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*.

V. Subsistence Uses and Needs Evaluation

Background Information

The 1980 additions to Denali National Park and Preserve are open to subsistence uses in accordance with Section 202(3)(a) of ANILCA. Lands within the former Mount McKinley National Park are closed to subsistence activities. Congress found and declared in Title VIII, Subsistence Management and Use, Section 801(3), that the continuation of the opportunity for subsistence uses of resources on public and other lands in Alaska is threatened by the increasing population of Alaska, with resultant pressure on subsistence

resources, by sudden decline in the populations of some wildlife species which are crucial subsistence resources, by increased accessibility of remote areas containing subsistence resources, and by the taking of fish and wildlife in a manner inconsistent with recognized principles of fish and wildlife management.

Furthermore, Congress declared it to be the policy in Section 802(1), that consistent with sound management principles and the conservation of healthy populations of fish and wildlife, the utilization of the public lands in Alaska is to cause the least adverse impact possible on rural residents who depend upon subsistence uses of resources of such lands; consistent with management of fish and wildlife in accordance with recognized scientific principles and the purposes for each unit established, designated, or expanded by Title II; it is the purpose of Title VIII to provide the opportunity for rural residents engaged in a subsistence way of life to do so.

Denali National Park and Preserve has a total of about 380 eligible local rural residents who qualify for subsistence use of park and preserve resources. Denali's subsistence users primarily reside in the communities of Cantwell, Minchumina, Nikolai, and Telida. Other local rural residents who do not live in these designated resident zone communities, but who have customarily and traditionally engaged in subsistence activities within the park, may continue to do so pursuant to a subsistence permit issued by the park superintendent. There are about 12 individuals from McKinley Village, Nenana, Healy, Tanana, and the community of Colorado south of Cantwell that have received subsistence use permits. Each year, between one and seven people engage in subsistence activities in the Kantishna area and about 50 households in Cantwell acquire moose permits.

Denali has two areas designated as National Preserves. Both federal subsistence and State of Alaska hunting and trapping are permitted in the national preserves. State harvests are regulated by State game laws passed by the Alaska Board of Game. Federal subsistence harvest is regulated by federal regulations passed by the Federal Subsistence Board.

ANILCA provides a preference for local rural residents over other consumptive users should a shortage of subsistence resources occur and allocation of harvest becomes necessary. This is particularly important for national preserves where state hunting and trapping is allowed. When the harvest must be limited, state hunting opportunities must be restricted first before any reduction in the harvest for federal subsistence users occurs.

Areas receiving the most extensive subsistence use activities are the northwestern park and preserve region near Lake Minchumina, and the southeastern park region near Cantwell, and the southern Kantishna Hills region near Kantishna. Cantwell area subsistence users primarily use park lands in the Windy Creek, lower Cantwell Creek, and Bull River drainages. In more recent years the Kantishna Hills region has seen increased utilization for subsistence resources. In the northwestern region, there is a long history of established traplines that extend throughout the ANILCA park and preserve additions up to the boundaries of the former Mt. McKinley National Park. Denali National Park and Preserve lands are responsible for only a portion of the estimated

community subsistence harvests reported by these communities since a significant portion of the areas used by these communities for subsistence are beyond the park and preserve boundaries

Overall, Denali's main subsistence species are moose, caribou, salmon, hare, rock and willow ptarmigan, spruce grouse, ducks and geese, and a few species of freshwater fish. Less frequently used large mammals include black bear, brown bear and Dall sheep. Fresh water fish include burbot, dolly varden, grayling, lake trout, northern pike, rainbow trout and whitefish. Important fur animals include marten, mink, red fox, wolf, lynx, weasel, wolverine, land otter, beaver, muskrat, and coyote.

The National Park Service recognizes that patterns of subsistence use vary from time to time and from place to place depending on the availability of wildlife and other renewable natural resources. A subsistence harvest in a given year may vary considerably from previous years because of such factors as weather, surface snow conditions for traveling, wildlife migration patterns, natural population cycles, and wildlife conservation practices of leaving a trapline fallow periodically.

Potential Impacts to Subsistence Users

Increases in types and levels of recreation have the potential to interfere with subsistence activities. As popular places become crowded, it is expected that recreational use will disperse into more remote or infrequently-used places. Potential restrictions to subsistence may occur if visitors frequent areas used for subsistence. Visitors, especially those who travel via motorized means, may disturb wildlife and interfere with subsistence users who are hunting or scouting for subsistence resources.

In the last five years, non-subsistence snowmachine use has expanded dramatically in and adjacent to the southeastern areas of the park, particularly in the area near Cantwell and Broad Pass. Along with increasing popularity for snowmobiling have come dramatic improvements in snowmachine technology. Because of the increased reliability, power and flotation ability of the newer snowmachines, snowmachiners have been accessing more distant areas and operating in significantly steeper and higher terrain than in past years.

Open habitat, mountain slopes, and reasonably good snow deposition in the Broad Pass area have attracted increasing numbers of snowmachiners from areas of the state accessible to the Parks Highway. Typically, non-subsistence snowmachine groups tend to travel in larger numbers and spend more time traveling in basins and drainages.

As the range of non-subsistence snowmachiners overlaps with subsistence use areas, the potential for conflict between these user groups increases. Snowmachine users can interfere with subsistence traplines, displace furbearers, and create paths that encourage animals to travel farther from places where subsistence activities typically occur. For several years, subsistence users have expressed concerns about the impacts and conflicts of increasing recreational use and increasing non-subsistence snowmachine use on

subsistence resources and subsistence activities. Members of Denali's Subsistence Resource Commission have specifically expressed concerns regarding the effects of increasing levels of snowmachine use in the Broad Pass/Cantwell area upon moose, furbearers, and ptarmigan populations and their distributions (Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes, April 30, 2001; April 29, 1996; August 9, 1996; and June 28, 1993). Concerns about the impacts of increasing non-subsistence uses were also mentioned by Lake Minchumina area residents during public scoping (see also Letter from Collins, 3/3/01).

The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes (June 1993) document high levels of non-subsistence related snowmachine use in the Cantwell area. It was noted that riders were primarily using drainages and basins, essentially saturating the area and displacing furbearers, causing local trappers to pull their traps prematurely in December of that year.

In the Preserves, sport hunting can also interfere with subsistence as subsistence users would have to compete with sport hunters for game.

Evaluation Criteria

To determine the potential impacts of the alternatives on existing subsistence activities, three evaluation criteria were analyzed relative to existing subsistence resources:

1. The potential to reduce important subsistence fish and wildlife populations by (a) reductions in number, (b) redistribution of subsistence resources, or (c) habitat losses;
2. What effect the action might have on subsistence fisher or hunter access;
3. The potential for the action to increase fisher or hunter competition for subsistence resources.

1. The potential to reduce populations

(a) Reduction in Numbers:

Alternatives 1-3

Actions in these alternatives are not expected to reduce numbers of wildlife.

Alternative 4 - Modified (NPS Preferred Alternative)

Expanding the hunting guide area in the southwest preserve has the potential to reduce wildlife populations as animals in this area could be shot; however, geographic and temporal limitations would prevent a significant restriction to subsistence resources.

Alternative 5

Expanding the hunting guide area in the southwest and northwest preserves has the potential to reduce wildlife populations as animals in these areas could be shot; however,

geographic and temporal limitations would prevent a significant restriction to subsistence resources.

(b) Redistribution of Resources:

Alternative 1 (no action)

Continuing current management direction under alternative 1 would result in rapidly increasing recreational use in parts of Denali National Park and Preserve, including in important subsistence use areas. The main impact from non-subsistence activities, such as snowmachine use and motorboat use, would be redistribution of wildlife resources available to subsistence users and competition for resources. This impact could be expected to increase over time as visitor use increases. There are no provisions in current management plans to allocate between recreational and subsistence uses, so increased user conflicts could be expected at some locations.

Increases in recreational activities in subsistence use areas have the potential to redistribute wildlife populations. Use levels among a variety of activities are expected to increase, especially near access points and at destinations that are already popular. Visitors engaged in recreational activities have the potential to harass or frighten wildlife. In addition to the mere presence of people, human-generated noise, and noise from machines, such as airplanes and snowmachines, could cause wildlife to move away from visitors. As popular areas become crowded, visitor use is expected to disperse to other areas of the park, which could force wildlife to vacate those areas.

For example, wildlife may be displaced by snowmachines in the Broad Pass area south of Cantwell, along the Stampede corridor, in the southwest preserve, and in the Tokositna and Lower Ruth areas, and may expend valuable energy fleeing from them. Potential adverse impacts on wildlife most likely would occur during mid-to-late winter, when wildlife is likely to be in a nutritionally-stressed condition. Some dispersion is also possible in the northwest preserve as wildlife could be frightened by non-subsistence motorboat and snowmachine use. This scenario would be likely in alternative 1 where park staff would have little ability to educate visitors about wildlife before visitors go into the backcountry.

Subsistence users in the Cantwell area have expressed concern about increasing snowmachine use in the Broad Pass area, as noted above. Subsistence users in the northwest preserve and adjacent park additions have also expressed concerns about motorized use. Additional non-subsistence use involving snowmachines and motorboats in subsistence use areas, such as along Birch Creek, could result in displacement of furbearers and moose, cabin vandalism and unauthorized use, disturbed traps, and conflicts between recreational and subsistence users (letters from Miki and Julie Collins, 7/16/00, 7/24/00 and 3/3/01). Introducing new or expanded recreational uses into these areas increases the potential for conflict between consumptive and non-consumptive users. Subsistence trappers may be adversely affected during certain times of the year by displacement of furbearers, and subsistence hunters may be adversely affected during

winter hunting seasons by the temporary displacement of wildlife, particularly moose and caribou.

Because of concerns about the declining number of ptarmigan in Wildlife Management Unit 13, which encompasses the east side of the south additions and important subsistence use areas south of Cantwell, hunting bag limits have been reduced and the season shortened to close on March 31. One of the reasons for shortening the season from April 30 to March 31 was to avoid hunting and activity during the nesting period in April. Increased recreation, particularly snowmachine use, could have a negative effect by causing displacement of ptarmigan populations during their sensitive breeding and nesting period (Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes, August 9, 1996 and June 28, 1993).

For several years, subsistence users have expressed concerns about the impacts and conflicts of increasing recreational use and increasing non-subsistence snowmachine use on subsistence resources and subsistence activities. Members of Denali's Subsistence Resource Commission have specifically expressed concerns regarding the effects of increasing levels of snowmachine use in the Broad Pass/Cantwell area upon moose, furbearers, and ptarmigan populations and their distributions (Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes, April 30, 2001; April 29, 1996; August 9, 1996; and June 28, 1993). The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes (June 1993) document high levels of non-subsistence related snowmachine use in the Cantwell area. It was noted that riders were primarily using drainages and basins, essentially saturating the area and displacing furbearers, causing local trappers to pull their traps prematurely in December of that year. As the range of non-subsistence snowmachine use overlaps with subsistence use areas, the potential for conflict between these user groups increases.

Non-subsistence snowmachine users would interfere with subsistence traplines, displace furbearers, and create paths that encourage animals to travel farther from places where subsistence activities typically occur. Trappers would continue to pull their traps by December because it would be inefficient to set traps in an area in which furbearers have been displaced.

Increased use of the park, particularly non-subsistence snowmachine use, would likely displace moose and caribou from critical wintering areas on park lands in the Windy and Cantwell Creek drainages. Local moose populations and the Cantwell group of the Nelchina Caribou herd use areas within the former Mount McKinley National Park and the ANILCA park additions of Windy Creek, Cantwell Creek, and the Bull River drainages during winter. These areas along the Alaska Range in the vicinity of Windy Pass provide important winter habitat for moose and caribou because snow depths associated with the pass area are less than in other areas.

Non-subsistence snowmachine use is often concentrated in these high-elevation basins where riders spend many hours at a time. These basins provide critical winter habitat for moose and caribou. Moose and caribou would continue to be displaced from these critical

wintering areas as non-subsistence snowmachine use increases. This could significantly increase the stress and nutritional demands upon moose and caribou and result in some moose or caribou mortality, depending on the environmental conditions and the body reserves of moose or caribou in a given year.

Non-subsistence snowmachine use originating in Cantwell begins when adequate snowcover is present, and during early winter, use is relatively low. As snowpack increases so does snowmachine use. In late winter when the days are lighter, warmer, and there's lots of snow, non-subsistence snowmachine use is highest. This corresponds with the time of the year when moose and caribou are at their lowest nutritional states. Non-subsistence snowmachine use would continue to induce stress on moose and caribou in the Windy and Cantwell drainages, especially in late winter when the animals are in a nutritional deficit. The magnitude of the impact would depend on snow depth. Die off would be greater as snow depth increases because displaced animals would have a more difficult time moving through the snow to forage and to get away from snowmachine use.

Due to the potential for high levels of widespread recreation that could create unfavorable conditions for wildlife (i.e. presence and noise from visitors would scare wildlife), alternative 1 would have major impacts on distribution of subsistence resources.

Alternative 2

Redistribution of wildlife populations is not expected under alternative 2 because of the emphasis on protecting wildlife habitat and highly dispersed recreation. Snowmachine use in the park additions and preserve would be limited to traditional activities as defined for the Old Park, which would result in an immediate decrease in the non-subsistence snowmachine use mentioned under alternative 1. The impacts described under alternative 1 would therefore not occur. Subsistence opportunities would likely improve as compared to current conditions because visitor use, particularly non-subsistence snowmachine use, would be reduced, so wildlife would be less likely to be frightened and move elsewhere. Alternative 2 would have the least overall impacts to subsistence resources and opportunities.

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 provides for dispersed recreational uses, including some motorized access, in parts of the park additions and preserve that are used for subsistence. Because non-subsistence uses would be managed for low encounter rates and minimal impacts to natural resources in most of the park additions and preserve, only minimal redistribution of populations would occur.

Snowmachine use would be limited to subsistence and traditional activities as defined for the Old Park in the park and preserve additions, and to established winter corridors for recreational use. Therefore, there would be an immediate decrease in non-subsistence snowmachine use throughout the park and preserve, but the winter corridors would result in areas of more concentrated snowmachine use.

Establishing corridors would channel snowmachine use in the Broad Pass area; to the toes of the Ruth, Tokositna, and Kanikula glaciers from the Tokositna River; and along the Yentna, Tokositna, and Kantishna/Muddy Rivers (135 linear miles of winter corridors). Trapping occurred west of Cantwell Creek in the 1990's, but it does not generally occur there presently, so high use snowmachine corridors designated under this alternative in the Broad Pass area would not conflict with areas around Cantwell that are currently used for subsistence activities. Along most of the other corridors, these higher use areas overlap with areas currently or traditionally used for subsistence activities. Encounters with wildlife along these corridors could cause behavioral disturbance, increase stress levels, and temporarily displace wildlife.

Minor impacts that would result would be attributable to snowmachine use, airplane access, and other increasing recreational uses that could scare wildlife and cause them to relocate.

Alternative 4 - Modified (NPS Preferred Alternative)

Under this alternative, access by snowmachine to the park and preserve additions would continue to grow. If demand is sufficient, Corridors could be designated to provide winter access along Cantwell Creek, Bull River, West Fork Chulitna, and the Tokositna River. In a future wilderness proposal, accommodation would be made as necessary for recreational snowmachine access along these Corridors (19.5 miles). Winter corridors would result in areas of concentrated snowmachine use. Areas designated as Management Area A would also allow for an encounter rate of up to five parties per day, including two parties larger than six people. All but the Tokositna River corridor overlap with areas currently or traditionally used for subsistence activities. Other than the Corridors, subsistence use areas in Kantishna and the Broad Pass area would be designated Management Area B and areas in the northwestern portion of the park would be designated Management Area D, allowing only moderate or low levels of visitor impacts respectively. However, non-subsistence snowmachine use could still occur in these areas and use levels could grow, particularly in accessible areas such as Broad Pass during times when there is presently little use.

For several years, subsistence users have expressed concerns about the impacts and conflicts of increasing recreational use and increasing non-subsistence snowmachine use on subsistence resources and subsistence activities. Members of Denali's Subsistence Resource Commission have specifically expressed concerns regarding the effects of increasing levels of snowmachine use in the Broad Pass/Cantwell area upon moose, furbearers, and ptarmigan populations and their distributions (Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes, April 30, 2001; April 29, 1996; August 9, 1996; and June 28, 1993). The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes (June 1993) document high levels of non-subsistence related snowmachine use in the Cantwell area. It was noted that riders were primarily using drainages and basins, essentially saturating the area and displacing furbearers, causing local trappers to pull their traps prematurely in December of that year. As the range of non-subsistence snowmachine use overlaps with subsistence use areas, the potential for conflict between these user groups increases.

Non-subsistence snowmachine users would interfere with subsistence traplines, displace furbearers, and create paths that encourage animals to travel farther from places where subsistence activities typically occur. Trappers would continue to pull their traps by December because it would be inefficient to set traps in an area in which furbearers have been displaced.

Increased use of the park, particularly non-subsistence snowmachine use, would likely displace moose and caribou from critical wintering areas on park lands in the Cantwell Creek drainage. Local moose populations and the Cantwell group of the Nelchina Caribou herd use areas within the former Mount McKinley National Park and the ANILCA park additions of Windy Creek, Cantwell Creek, and the Bull River drainages during winter. These areas along the Alaska Range in the vicinity of Windy Pass provide important winter habitat for moose and caribou because snow depths associated with the pass area are less than in other areas.

Wildlife may be displaced by snowmachines in the Broad Pass area south of Cantwell, along the Stampede corridor, in the southwest preserve, and in the Tokositna and Lower Ruth areas, and may expend valuable energy fleeing from them. Potential adverse impacts on wildlife most likely would occur during mid-to-late winter, when wildlife is likely to be in a nutritionally-stressed condition. Some dispersion is also possible in the northwest preserve as wildlife could be frightened by non-subsistence motorboat and snowmachine use.

Subsistence users in the northwest preserve and adjacent park additions have also expressed concerns about motorized use. Additional non-subsistence use involving snowmachines and motorboats in subsistence use areas, such as along Birch Creek, could result in displacement of furbearers and moose, cabin vandalism and unauthorized use, disturbed traps, and conflicts between recreational and subsistence users (letters from Miki and Julie Collins, 7/16/00, 7/24/00 and 3/3/01). Introducing new or expanded recreational uses into these areas increases the potential for conflict between consumptive and non-consumptive users. Subsistence trappers may be adversely affected during certain times of the year by displacement of furbearers, and subsistence hunters may be adversely affected during winter hunting seasons by the temporary displacement of wildlife, particularly moose and caribou.

Because of concerns about the declining number of ptarmigan in Wildlife Management Unit 13, which encompasses the east side of the south additions and important subsistence use areas south of Cantwell, hunting bag limits have been reduced and the season shortened to close on March 31. One of the reasons for shortening the season from April 30 to March 31 was to avoid hunting and activity during the nesting period in April. Increased recreation, particularly snowmachine use, could have a negative effect by causing displacement of ptarmigan populations during their sensitive breeding and nesting period (Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes, August 9, 1996 and June 28, 1993).

Redistribution of wildlife could also occur as a result of expanding the hunting guide area in the southwest preserve. Human presence, aircraft used to access the area, and gunshots may frighten wildlife, causing animals to relocate.

Due to the potential for high levels of widespread recreation and increases in non-subsistence snowmachine use that could create unfavorable conditions for subsistence wildlife populations, this alternative would have minor to moderate impacts on subsistence resources and opportunities.

Alternative 5

There would be considerable potential for redistribution of resources under alternative 5 because of continued increases in non-subsistence activities in important subsistence use areas. Redistribution of wildlife populations would result from greater levels of motorized use, including snowmachine use, motorboats, and airplane landings.

Access by snowmachine to the park additions and preserves would continue and grow. Designating corridors for winter use would focus snowmachine use in the following places: from the southern park boundary to the Old Park boundary near the West Fork Chulitna, Bull River, and Cantwell Creek; to the toes of the Ruth, Tokositna, and Kanikula glaciers from the Tokositna River; to Kantishna from the Sushana River; along the Yentna, Tokositna, and Kantishna/Muddy Rivers. In a future wilderness proposal, accommodation would be made as necessary for recreational snowmachine access along corridors and throughout those areas designated as Management Area A (18% of the total park area plus 183 linear miles of corridors). Winter corridors would result in areas of more concentrated snowmachine use and areas designated as management area A would allow for an encounter rate of up to five parties per day, including two parties of larger than six people. Nearly all of the winter corridors overlap with areas currently or traditionally used for subsistence activities. Increases in snowmachine use would likely frighten animals and cause them to relocate. Potential adverse impacts on wildlife most likely would occur during mid-to-late winter, when wildlife is likely to be in a nutritionally-stressed condition.

Redistribution of wildlife could also occur as a result of expanding the hunting guide areas in the southwest and northwest preserves. Human presence, aircraft used to access the area, and gunshots may frighten wildlife, causing animals to relocate.

For several years, subsistence users have expressed concerns about the impacts and conflicts of increasing recreational use and increasing non-subsistence snowmachine use on subsistence resources and subsistence activities. Members of Denali's Subsistence Resource Commission have specifically expressed concerns regarding the effects of increasing levels of snowmachine use in the Broad Pass/Cantwell area upon moose, furbearers, and ptarmigan populations and their distributions (Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes, April 30, 2001; April 29, 1996; August 9, 1996; and June 28, 1993). The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes (June 1993) document high levels of non-subsistence related snowmachine use in the Cantwell area. It was noted that riders were primarily using drainages and basins,

essentially saturating the area and displacing furbearers, causing local trappers to pull their traps prematurely in December of that year. As the range of non-subsistence snowmachine use overlaps with subsistence use areas, the potential for conflict between these user groups increases.

Non-subsistence snowmachine users would interfere with subsistence traplines, displace furbearers, and create paths that encourage animals to travel farther from places where subsistence activities typically occur. Trappers would continue to pull their traps by December because it would be inefficient to set traps in an area in which furbearers have been displaced.

Increased use of the park, particularly non-subsistence snowmachine use, would likely displace moose and caribou from critical wintering areas on park lands in the Windy and Cantwell Creek drainages. Local moose populations and the Cantwell group of the Nelchina Caribou herd use areas within the former Mount McKinley National Park and the ANILCA park additions of Windy Creek, Cantwell Creek, and the Bull River drainages during winter. These areas along the Alaska Range in the vicinity of Windy Pass provide important winter habitat for moose and caribou because snow depths associated with the pass area are less than in other areas.

Wildlife may be displaced by snowmachines in the Broad Pass area south of Cantwell, along the Stampede corridor, in the southwest preserve, and in the Tokositna and Lower Ruth areas, and may expend valuable energy fleeing from them. Potential adverse impacts on wildlife most likely would occur during mid-to-late winter, when wildlife is likely to be in a nutritionally-stressed condition. Some dispersion is also possible in the northwest preserve as wildlife could be frightened by non-subsistence motorboat and snowmachine use.

Subsistence users in the northwest preserve and adjacent park additions have also expressed concerns about motorized use. Additional non-subsistence use involving snowmachines and motorboats in subsistence use areas, such as along Birch Creek, could result in displacement of furbearers and moose, cabin vandalism and unauthorized use, disturbed traps, and conflicts between recreational and subsistence users (letters from Miki and Julie Collins, 7/16/00, 7/24/00 and 3/3/01). Introducing new or expanded recreational uses into these areas increases the potential for conflict between consumptive and non-consumptive users. Subsistence trappers may be adversely affected during certain times of the year by displacement of furbearers, and subsistence hunters may be adversely affected during winter hunting seasons by the temporary displacement of wildlife, particularly moose and caribou.

Because of concerns about the declining number of ptarmigan in Wildlife Management Unit 13, which encompasses the east side of the south additions and important subsistence use areas south of Cantwell, hunting bag limits have been reduced and the season shortened to close on March 31. One of the reasons for shortening the season from April 30 to March 31 was to avoid hunting and activity during the nesting period in April. Increased recreation, particularly snowmachine use, could have a negative effect by

causing displacement of ptarmigan populations during their sensitive breeding and nesting period (Denali Subsistence Resource Commission Meeting Minutes, August 9, 1996 and June 28, 1993).

Due to the potential for high levels of widespread recreation that could create unfavorable conditions for wildlife (i.e. presence and noise from visitors would scare wildlife), Alternative 5 would have major impacts on distribution of subsistence resources.

(c) Habitat Loss:

None of the alternatives would result in significant habitat loss. Alternative 5 would result in the greatest habitat loss. Proposed facilities in alternative 5 include some trails and campsites on the south side of the park additions and temporary facilities to support winter recreation. These facilities would result in only negligible or temporary habitat loss.

2. Restriction of Access:

Access for subsistence uses on the ANILCA park and preserve additions is granted pursuant to Sections 811(a)(b) and 1110(a). Section 811(b) of ANILCA states that "rural residents engaged in subsistence uses shall have reasonable access to subsistence resources on the public lands." Section 1110(a) of ANILCA authorizes the use of snowmachines for traditional activities during periods of adequate snow cover.

None of the alternatives would restrict access for subsistence. The National Park Service would take action to manage visitor use under many circumstances if that use would be detrimental to subsistence resource values of the park. Proposed registration requirements would be designed to count and track the level of use and would not disrupt subsistence uses. Subsistence users would be registered automatically by meeting eligibility requirements.

3. Increase in Competition:

Alternative 1

Increasing use of the preserve areas could eventually result in additional hunting activity and competition for wildlife resources. For example, Lake Minchumina area subsistence users have expressed concerns that unrestricted hunting in the northwest preserve, especially along the Muddy River, would deplete moose populations and prevent subsistence hunters from obtaining meat (letter from Miki and Julie Collins, 7/24/00). Although there is less subsistence use in the southwest preserve, the same effect could occur in that area.

The park and preserve additions are open to both subsistence and non-subsistence fishing. Subsistence use of fisheries is generally infrequent except in the northwest preserve.

National Park Service regulations and provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act mandate that if and when it is necessary to restrict the taking of fish, subsistence users are the priority consumptive users on federal public lands. They would be given preference on such lands over other consumptive uses (ANILCA, Section 802(2)). Continued implementation of the ANILCA provisions should mitigate any increased competition from resource users other than eligible subsistence users.

Increased non-subsistence use in the park and preserve additions, especially snowmachine use, leads to more frequent user conflicts (letter from Russ Wilson, 12/28/99; letter from Miki and Julie Collins, 7/24/00). Conflict is likely in areas where non-subsistence use is rapidly increasing, such as south of Cantwell. Higher levels of use have the potential to displace local wildlife resources farther from common access corridors and into the Old Park, where these resources would be out of reach of subsistence users. In other places, such as in the northwest preserve, increased non-subsistence use over time, particularly snowmachine and motorboat use, could result in less wildlife being locally available, so subsistence users would have to travel farther to locate and harvest subsistence resources. To prevent any restriction to subsistence resources due to increased recreational use in the park additions and preserve (especially along common access corridors), the National Park Service would take a reactionary approach that may result in emergency closures to recreation.

Increased use and access near subsistence traplines near Lake Minchumina encourage snowmachiners and other travelers from the Kantishna area and the road system to use subsistence trapline routes. Every year the trapline is open, additional users follow it into the park. Subsistence users find it necessary to patrol their cabins to make sure recreational users are not using them illegally, and this requires additional time away from subsistence activities. Additional trails made from recreational users can confuse the dog teams of the subsistence users. To avoid conflicts with recreational users, subsistence users have altered their trapping schedule by pulling sets early. Subsistence users have stated that rapid increases in numbers of people cause considerable concern about their way of life and connection to a pristine environment being threatened (letter from Collins, 6/2/00).

Alternatives 2 and 3

None of the proposals in alternatives 2 and 3 are expected to result in increased competition for subsistence resources. Non-subsistence snowmachine use in the Broad Pass area, for example, could be expected to decrease significantly in alternative 2, resulting in far fewer conflicts with subsistence uses.

Alternative 4 (NPS Preferred Alternative)

Increases in recreation and facilitated access would occur throughout the park; however, management zoning under this alternative protects subsistence resources by allowing for managed growth and lower levels of use in areas used for subsistence.

Minor competition would occur in the southwest preserve as the hunting guide area would be expanded.

Alternative 5

Alternative 5 includes provisions for managing recreational uses and allocating between recreational and subsistence uses. However, the zoning scheme under alternative 5 allows for higher levels of resource impacts (as compared to the other action alternatives) and provides for increased access throughout much of the park and preserve additions, including important subsistence use areas.

As in alternative 1, improved access to the preserve areas over time could result in additional hunting activity and competition for wildlife resources. Alternative 5 would also expand hunting guide areas in the southwest and northwest preserve; however, the areas would be limited geographically and use would be limited to only certain times of the year to prevent a significant restriction to subsistence resources. Alternative 5 differs from alternative 1 in that non-subsistence use would be managed using the tools described in Actions Common to All Action Alternatives to achieve the desired conditions for each management area. However, more hunting may occur in the southwest and northwest preserve since there would be an additional guiding company in each. The potential for increased competition would likely be about the same as under alternative 1. In light of additional access and activity proposed under this alternative, the National Park Service may have to take management action in order to prevent a significant restriction to subsistence resources throughout the life of the backcountry management plan (the next 20 years).

VI. Availability of Other Lands and Alternatives to the Proposed Action

The backcountry management plan and general management plan amendment includes all areas within the park additions and preserve that are open to subsistence uses. Therefore, there are no other lands that can be substituted in the proposed action.

VII. Alternatives Considered

The backcountry management plan includes a full range of alternatives with proposals for different levels of recreational use and access improvements. This range of alternatives includes some alternatives in which impacts on subsistence uses would be avoided (see Findings below).

VIII. Findings

This analysis concludes that the preferred alternative and proposed actions would not result in a significant restriction of subsistence uses. However the National Park Service would have to take reactionary measures, such as closing areas to recreation, in order to prevent a significant restriction of subsistence resources from alternative 1 (no action alternative) and alternative 5.

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